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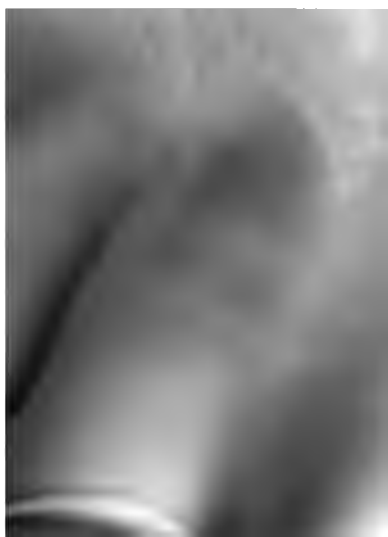


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Alfred Ingram  
May month 1890

MISS FORRESTER.



# MISS FORRESTER.

A Novel.

[Annie Edwards] BY

MRS. EDWARDS,

AUTHOR OF

"ARCHIE LOVELL," "STEVEN LAWRENCE, YEOMAN,"

"THE MORALS OF MAYFAIR," ETC. ETC.

"The leopard follows her nature as the lamb does, and acts after leopard law; she can neither help her beauty, nor her courage, nor her cruelty; nor a single spot on her shining coat; nor the conquering spirit which impels her; nor the shot which brings her down."—*RAMOND*.

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# MISS FORRESTER.

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## CHAPTER I.

"DIES STARVED."

"ANOTHER day—and I am here still. Great Heaven! how long—how long!"

And Honoria Forrester rose from her place beside the dying woman's bed, drew aside the curtain that muffled the light of the wan March morning from the chamber of death, and then, leaning her face impatiently against the window-pane, looked forth upon the street.

She knew every detail of that street well. For weeks past she had been looking at these same dingy London houses, at this same dingy pavement, at these same dingy passers-by. Whoever gets a habit of watching from his window in London at one particular hour of the day will find, at the end of a week, that he knows a certain number of the men and women who habitually pass there, as well as he would do if he lived in a village and looked out, at a certain hour, upon a village street. At ten o'clock it was Miss Forrester's custom to stand, as she was doing this morning, wearied with her broken night, looking forward only to another stagnant silent day, and taking note—but absolutely without will or interest of her own—of that particular section of the London world which her window in this dull, old-fashioned corner house of Harley Street commanded.

The accustomed faces greeted her now. Only, the morning being more sullenly gray than even the majority of London mornings, they all of them looked somewhat more pinched, more careworn, more generally full of misery at having to go through another day, than usual. The ashen face of the cada-



verous man who came to clean the lamps was blue with cold, and a wretched wisp of a comforter, twisted round his neck, added, rather than lessened, the starved effect of the full evening suit (that had once been black), in which his morning duties were performed. The cheeks of the mild butcher's boy, who, on warm mornings, would read desultory scraps of gory newspaper, and run his tray into the faces of the passers-by as he walked, were to-day mottled and raw-looking as a joint of his own beef. The street-sweeper at the corner—with a club-foot more distorted than ever entered into the brain of mediæval artist to conceive—was alternately beating his arms across his chest with savage emphasis, and breathing fiercely upon his swollen, mitted hands. The Professor, going to Number 9, hurried along as fast as his little French legs, and huge cloak that the cruel wind blew between them, would allow. Only the sweeps, who from adventitious circumstances must, outwardly at least, be beyond atmospheric influences, kept their usual countenance to-day; but even in their hoarse cry, fog and cold and misery were as palpably discernible to Honoria Forrester's intelligence as they were upon the faces of normally coloured men.

"This is life," she thought. "This is life, such as common men and women lead in the common streets (I knew it, or very near to it, once), and by how much better are we off who look at them from within? Not much, I think. Is it a gift to be prized? By me, yes, for I know how to live; but by the every-day run of people, to a woman like this one who's dying, where is life's worth? What good would be done to her by keeping her from going? If one of these wretches in the street was sinking from his cold and pain into forgetfulness, which would be the mercy,—to let him go, or to hold him back? Her life hasn't lacked food and shelter, certainly, but it has been a life of pain, of peevishness, of discontent, for years. Why seek to prolong it? Why, above all, when, as she told me yesterday, she believes herself to be going to a better place and better company than mine!"

And Miss Forrester walked back to the bedside, and, folding her arms across her chest, looked down, long and closely, upon her unconscious patient's face.

The epitome of life that will one day be written on your face and mine, reader, was plainly legible there. Hope, disappointment, pleasure, pain—all over! All summed up on

that lined and livid face, and the final balance, evidently not upon the brighter side. Mrs. Forsyth had been a rich woman, a courted woman; had known love once, perhaps; had had a husband and brothers and sisters certainly, and now she was dying of low fever; under much the same condition as the poor Irish mason's starved wife in the squalid court behind the mews: only with parsons to read to her, and physicians to prescribe for her, and with her hired companion, Miss Honoria Forrester, to succour her *in extremis*.

For more than a fortnight Miss Forrester had scarcely left Mrs. Forsyth's side. She wanted no help, she said, in answer to the physician's suggestion of a professional nurse. She had a constitution of adamant. Time enough to think of troubling the patient with a new face when she broke down. And, true to her resolution, she had nursed her alone; often sitting up by night, as well as by day, to the last. She was right. She had a constitution of adamant. She could eat her meals heartily in the atmosphere of a sick-room, where the patient, as long as she retained consciousness at all, never suffered a window to be opened; could take snatches of sweet sound sleep between every call of the impatient querulous voice throughout the night. Sleep and digestion never forsook Honoria Forrester under any crisis of her life. Had they done so, she had probably been a better woman, so indissolubly connected is dyspepsia even with our sense of right and wrong. And as she went to the glass and began her morning toilette, at this moment, after three weeks of constant confinement, and the hardest of all physical and mental strain, nursing, she looked fresher, less worn than the majority of young women would look on the morning after a ball.

Strength was preëminently written, indeed, upon every line of her face and figure. She was of middle height, broad-chested, compactly knit. The bust short as compared to the length of limb; the arms full above the elbow, and finely cut and proportioned towards the wrist; the hands white and blue-veined, but shaped on somewhat too masculine a mould for beauty. Women said that her waist was coarse and her shoulders large. No man ever looked at Honoria Forrester's unwhaleboned, untrammelled figure without pronouncing it perfect. And her foot was a model; arched, small, and singularly full of character in its short elastic tread. As for her face, I cannot tell you exactly whether she was beautiful or

not. If she was not, beauty is an unnecessary quality in the art of leading men's hearts captive; for, as with some pictures, you are never tired of looking at Honoria Forrester's face, and every day you got to learn something that charmed you afresh, either in its features or expression. Catalogued, it was far from faultless: low forehead, square, massive-cut jaw; large mouth; unclassical nose; but flushed with life and vigorous health—I address myself here to men—you could not criticise. And she had a complexion of delicate pink and white, and perfect small square white teeth, and firm red lips, and hair, not very profuse in quantity, but exquisitely fine, and yellow as fresh-spun silk. This hair was dressed, by processes only known to herself, first in a soft cloud of tiny waves that almost reached her straight black eyebrows, and then drawn back from the temples in a retreating cunning mass from which one or two natural-looking ringlets (they were not curls) fell upon her neck.

Her eyes were common gray blue eyes, neither large nor small, but with an expression in their dilated pupils that by turns repulsed or fascinated you at will. I don't say it was the expression of an animal. The exclusively human prerogative of dissimulation was Honoria's by birthright; but still when you looked deep into the black iris of those unresting eyes, you did ask yourself what wild creature it was that you instinctively thought of. To all human tenderness, to all human weakness, they were blank. Indeed, about the whole of that supple, strong *physique*, with its unscathed nerves, its muscles and joints of steel, there was something directly corroborative of the opinion of those theorists who affirm that man's place in nature is not a god-like one.

She stood, as I said, with folded arms, looking down upon her unconscious patient's face. What she read there must have been satisfactory, for, at the end of three or four minutes, her mouth relaxed into a smile, and, with more of life than her movements had as yet showed this day, she walked across to the dressing-table at the other side of the room, and began her morning toilet.

It was elaborate even in its simplicity. In the room of a dying woman, and with only one elderly physician as her possible audience, Miss Forrester took an hour and a half to dress. Her nature was not a complex one. She had a few indomitable instincts—to which she was as faithful, perhaps, as higher

natures are to their principles—and one of these was the instinct of dress. Dress, not as an inferior artist understands the term; *id est*, silks, ribbons, and cashmeres; but dress in its most catholic and exhaustive meaning: the whole external machinery of the science of seduction. Every hair upon Miss Forrester's head, every inch of her skin, every thread of linen that she wore, received the same untiring scrupulous care at her hands. Long ago she had taken an ice-cold bath in the adjoining dressing-room. Her dress was already completed, as far as the white, flowing wrapper that she would wear till noon, and still an hour's work was before her; for her hair was still in pins, her eyebrows, her eyelashes, her complexion unfinished.

"What! this woman painted?" you say. "Then to me all her charms would have been without charm."

Wait! You say that because you have been used to connect the word "paint" with all manner of coarse and inartistic renovations; with women who strive to make up by artifice for the youth, or bloom, or strength of colouring they lack. Honoria Forrester's skin was delicate, her eyebrows dark, by nature. She was in the perfection of her first maturity still, and she was a thorough professional artist! Looking at her black-lashed eyes and scarlet lips and rose-leaf complexion through the thinnest possible veil out of doors, or, unveiled, in the broadest light any woman ever admits into a drawing-room, you could detect no trace whatever of artificial process on her face. Only as a master's hand puts the last touch that transfigures his picture from painted canvas into life, she gloried in putting the last cunning touch that transformed her face from mere commonplace beauty into irresistible piquancy, and a freshness more natural than nature itself.

There are some professions and trades the practitioners of which hold no social rank by right of office. It is only when his porter is manufactured and exported by thousands of annual hogsheds, for example, that its maker commands a seat in Parliament or a place at county dinners. Such, I take it, is the case with women who paint their faces. Inordinate success alone confirms the patent of nobility upon a calling not honourable in itself. To this point Miss Forrester had attained, and she knew it; not unfrequently confessed to her more intimate allies that she did make up. "Was there harm in it? Was not one's first duty to be as little disagreeable to the world as one could?" And, is it needful to add, she looked

down with orthodox professional contempt on the immoral quacks, the unqualified low practitioners in the handicraft whereof she herself was an adept.

As in all other branches of art, extraordinary proficiency in the practice of enamelling the human skin, or blackening the human eyes, preëminently demands these two qualities: inborn genius and, the handmaid of all genius, patience. This last quality was also among the three or four simple elements of Honoria's nature. Look at her now. Look at her carefully releasing lock after lock from those dozens of pins; look at the tedious adjustment of every line, of every hair, in that elaborate *coiffeur*, that no one but herself and one old doctor shall see, and say if you would like to have her against you in any juncture of life in which the possibility of your ruin was to be attained by her perseverance? As well seek to baulk the spider from re-mending his broken web as to turn this woman aside in any pursuit—love, or war, or ambition—to which she had once resolutely set her mind.

When her toilette was finished, she set the table fastidiously in order with her own hands; she hated the attendance of servants at all times, hated it especially in her present capacity as Mrs. Forsyth's nurse; took a book of handsomely-bound devotions, "St. Thomas à Kempis," in her hand, rang the bell, and then seated herself demurely by the patient's side. In ten minutes a woman-servant entered with a tray containing Miss Forrester's breakfast—claret, a patty, a morsel of cold pheasant, a small bottle of liqueur, and some grapes. Miss Forrester had been brought up abroad, and always breakfasted thus. What constitutes the breakfast of Englishwomen, a cup of coffee and a roll, being taken by her before rising, at seven.

The servant-girl looked at her mistress's dying face, and started. "Lord, Miss!" she ejaculated, turning to Honoria, "isn't missus much worse since last night? She looks——"

"Hush!" interrupted Miss Forrester quickly, and putting her finger on her lips; "Mrs. Forsyth has been sleeping for the last two hours. Everything may depend on her not being disturbed. Put the breakfast down quietly, and as you go out shut the door without noise. When I want you again I will ring."

"And you think her no worse, Miss?" said the girl, lingering.

"I think her no better," answered Honoria, but in a tone that utterly discouraged further inquiry. "When the doctor comes we shall know more. I have everything I require, thank you. Be sure you shut the door quietly."

The girl left the room, after another long look at the unconscious white face upon the pillow, and went down to promulgate abroad in the household her decided opinion that her mistress was dying, and that Miss knew it too. And for all she'd been so good sitting up at night, which she, Mary, couldn't deny, she showed no more feeling than flint at the approach of death. "And have got her yellow hair a-frizzed and a-Frenchified, if you'll believe me, Mister Thomas, and sitting as cool as you please with her breakfast—that lovely pheasant that has never gone a-nigh poor missus's lips—drawn up comfortably before the fire; and missus's best new Turkey slippers on her feet. So much for your beauties and your foreigners, Mr. Thomas!" Mr. Thomas had always upheld Miss Forrester's appearance, greatly to the embitterment and aggravation of all the female portion of the household. "If missus had taken a quiet English young lady for companion instead of a stuck-up play-actor like this one, things might have ended different."

The butler remarked that he did not see how an English companion would have altered the course of Mrs. Forsyth's illness. Miss Forrester, as Mary herself could not contradict, had set up with her like a daughter; and for her manner and consideration to all in the house he, Thomas, would back her against every English companion or governess he'd ever had anything to do with before.

"Hang her manners!" cried Mary, coarsely, "and her beauty, which I never see myself; and I do say, and cook says so too, that her yellow hair dragged down over her eyes is he-dious to behold, and all belonging to her! When poor missus is dead, and we're all out of place, Mr. Thomas, you mark my words if Miss hasn't feathered a pretty nest for herself, and been remembered in the will too. I hated her from the first minute I seed her, and if some people's fools enough to be taken in by her palaver, and her foreign ways, I'm not. When I was a child my mother told me about Courvoysur," added Mary with savage animus; "him as murdered his master in his sleep; and I say, and have said, and I'll say till my dying day, the Lord keep those as have money to leave from

having foreigners about 'em in sickness! I know my duty as a Christian, Mr. Thomas, and I accuse nobody; but I do say I don't believe missus's beef-tea has been given her regular."

Partly on principle, partly from natural distaste to her own sex, it was the rule of Miss Forrester's life to propitiate men only. A few exceptions it was of course forced upon her to make; and one of these had been Mrs. Forsyth, to whose minutest caprice or temper Honoria had been subservient during more than two years. The rule of her life was to ignore women altogether in the great struggle for existence. No plain woman, however hearty her inclination, can do this. A plain woman must have auxiliaries, in the onset at least, of her attacks. A plain woman must, for appearances' sake, have female friends to fall back upon in times of desertion or neglect. But Honoria needed neither assistance nor support. Her position she knew, ever since she was twelve years of age, must be won alone—her hand against every woman, and every woman's hand against her. The alliances that strengthen others of her sex would only have weakened her. She knew, she said openly, that she did not get on with women, or they with her. She could not tell why; she could only tell that the fact was so—no doubt from some fault in her own character—and men must take her as she was. And all men, from dukes to footmen, seemed quite content to do so. And all men, when Honoria had once lifted her eyes to theirs, liked her in their hearts, and thought it the most natural thing possible that other women should be mortally jealous of her charms.

This rule of hers had been fully carried out in Mrs. Forsyth's household, and Honoria smiled in her consciousness of the fact, as Mary's suspicious face reluctantly withdrew itself from the sick-room. "Lucky that the enfranchisement of my charming sex wont come on in my lifetime," she thought. "If Mrs. Forsyth's physician were a woman, I should find her a good deal more troublesome to deal with than poor, dear, stupid old Dr. Crawford!"

And then Miss Forrester put away her book of devotions, having first made it turn several lengthened, but irreverent somersaults in the air, and seating herself down before the comfortably blazing fire, began to eat her breakfast.

She made an excellent meal; her superb digestion carry-

ing her through it with as hearty a zest as though she had been out for a ten-mile forest ride, instead of breathing the close air of a London bed-room. Patty, pheasant, grapes—not one of the viands that had excited Mary's jealousy was overlooked. Half a tumbler of the finest Chateau-Margaux concluded the repast; after which Miss Forrester returned to her easy chair, drew forth a yellow-paper volume from beneath its cushion, and stretching out her little slippered feet to the fire, settled herself down to read with every appearance of mental and physical enjoyment.

Differently placed, she would have finished her breakfast by a cigarette: but in the state which it had pleased Providence to call her this was impossible; and her morning stimulus was perforce a mental one—*La Princesse Parisienne*, by M. de Balzac. Miss Forrester had an old-fashioned and not altogether unhealthy taste in literature. As a proof of this, Balzac was the one among French writers who satisfied her best. No word in all that mass of detail ever wearied her attention; no faintest movement of the scalpel in all that patient dissection of moral gangrene and corruption was lost upon her. She liked Balzac as she would have liked, had she ever read, English novels of such a date, the hard prosaic accuracy of Defoe. She had known scores of women like the *Princesse Parisienne*; she could enter heart and soul into the memoir of her disappointments, her projects, her successes, her toilettes, her profound unconscious depravity! "Fanny," and the "Lady of the Camellias," with their alternations of milk-and-water temptation and milk-and-water remorse, were simply to her sentimental young women, about whom sentimental young men wrote impossible stories. *This* was life; and so absorbed was she in her enjoyment of it, and of the fire, and of that indescribable state of completeness only known to the rare human creature who can digest, that the patient, rousing from her stupor, had to moan and turn feebly on her pillow more than once before awakening the attention of the devoted nurse "who had sat up with her like a daughter." But as soon as she knew herself to be needed, Miss Forrester shut her book at once, rose, and walked up to the bedside. Mrs. Forsyth's eyes were wide open, and her companion looked into them and read more of consciousness there than she had read during the last three days. Had the end indeed come? She wondered



this; she desired this from her soul, as she stood there looking fixedly into her mistress's face; then she laid her finger, her cool, nervous untrembling finger, upon the wasted wrist, and sought for the pulse.

It was impossible to count its beats, the tide of life had weakened to so faint an ebb. Yes, the preceding twelve hours had advanced rapidly indeed towards the last great change of all; and with an intense sigh of relief and pity (for herself) Miss Forrester came to the conclusion that her duties were well-nigh ended.

But no great general good or ill ever made Honoria forgetful of detail. "Old Crawford will be here directly," she thought, "prying about into all the cups and teaspoons as usual. I must be prepared. The question is, can there be any need to torture a woman in such a state as this with nourishment still?"

In other words, could the patient still swallow? Even people like Honoria Forrester make use of euphemisms in their self-communings. Mrs. Forsyth could swallow: did swallow, greedily, and with upturned pleading gaze, about a spoonful and a half of sugar-and-water that Miss Forrester gave her: swallowed it more with the avidity of exhaustion craving for food than with the unconsciousness of fever seeking solace for its thirst.

"We must use means while means are in our reach," soliloquised Honoria. "'My dear young lady, these things are in the hands of higher powers, but all that attention *can* do,' et cetera. How well I know every word the old hypocrite will say while he holds my hand, and pretends not to know he's squeezing it! '*Have* you given the teaspoonful of broth every two hours? *and* the wine?' but I see you have.' And he will be right."

And lifting the lid from a small silver lamp, Miss Forrester took a teaspoonful of soup out of the cup that stood ready heated in hot water, and swallowed it herself. She then returned to the patient's side, refreshed the corpse-like face and hands by softly wiping them with eau-de-cologne and water, smoothed and re-arranged the fever-tossed pillows, and then raised the dying woman upon them with that peculiar unison of strength and gentleness that made her so admirable a nurse.

She had just completed these offices, and was still standing

with one outstretched arm supporting Mrs. Forsyth's pillow, when a muffled knock came at the house-door. A minute later the old physician entered the sick-room. Every one of Honoria Forrester's attitudes was good; but at this moment she had selected about the strongest of the whole *répertoire*, and the doctor's eyes, dazzled by that white full arm—for the wide sleeves of her morning wrapper had fallen back, and displayed it almost to the shoulder—by the flowing lines of that luxuriant figure, by the drooping grace of that averted golden head: the doctor's eyes, dazzled by these things, did not for a second or two fall upon the patient's dying face. By the time they did he was thinking—well, old man though he was, he was thinking of Miss Forrester.

"I have been looking for you so long, Dr. Crawford; I am so thankful you have come." And Miss Forrester, tenderly shifted the position of her helpless burden, and extended her warm firm hand to the doctor, who retained it, as she had predicted, for a considerable time within his own.

Doctor Crawford was an orthodox, old-fashioned doctor, who shut his eyes resolutely to all new-fangled theories about nature, and non-intervention, and such nonsense. A man believing in himself and in his own drugs, and holding disease (as a parson would a dissenter) to be a direct and hostile enemy that must be extirpated by fire and sword. He was scrupulous to eccentricity in his care of his patients. Twice a day during the last fortnight he had visited Mrs. Forsyth, and on each occasion had administered her medicine with his own hands, or watched it administered by Miss Forrester. If a woman taking the medicine prescribed by him regularly continued to sink, what could it show but that the enemy was too strong for human means to defeat? A sceptical disciple of the new school, looking to other means than drugs for help, might have searched more narrowly for the cause of that deadly prostration which day by day was leading Mrs. Forsyth to her grave. But Doctor Crawford, as I have said, was orthodox; and Miss Forrester was very beautiful; and, in spite of his gray hairs and grown-up children, the doctor was a great admirer of beautiful women; and somehow, after the first inquiries for the patient had been made, the medicine swallowed, the routine questions as to nourishment asked and answered; after the first professional three or four minutes had elapsed of each visit, it

had happened that the doctor's mind was more carried away from his duty than it had ever been before during the last five-and-twenty years at least of his professional career.

But, in spite of the bare white arms, and golden head, and warm firm hand, Doctor Crawford had no sooner put back the curtain and seen the livid sunken face that lay there than his own changed ominously. For a greater enemy than disease; an enemy against whom all pharmacopœias and colleges of surgeons are impotent, was staring at him full! He had known Mrs. Forsyth for years, and held her hand with real feeling for a minute or two, searching, as Miss Forrester had searched, for the fast-ebbing pulse. Then he laid it down gently on the coverlid of the bed, and, moving noiselessly across the room to the window, signed to Honoria to follow him.

"The change has come, Miss Forrester," he said, looking pityingly into her eyes. "I never hide the truth from a friend, however devoted. Mrs. Forsyth is dying."

Miss Forrester clasped her hands out towards him, and turned her face away, *en profile perdu*, as from her youth upwards she had always seen the first artists do under grief.

"Dying!" she murmured. "O, this is sudden! Doctor, are you sure?"

"Mrs. Forsyth will not last, in all human probability, until this time to-morrow. When the disease, my dear young lady, in cases like this, once invades the mesenteric glands, the natural nourishment of the body, as you are no doubt aware, cannot pass into the blood, and the patient, no matter what amount of food he takes, dies starved—"

Honoria Forrester started.

"You have, of course—I need not ask you—continued to give the nourishment regularly? Do so still, unless the patient is evidently pained by its administration. And—and—" here he took both her hands, and for the first time since he had known her found them suddenly damp and cold; "try as much as possible to keep your own strength and spirits up. You have done marvels hitherto, Miss Forrester, but the worst of all is before you. I don't think you should be alone to-night."

"No," she answered, "I will not be alone; I don't think I could stand it. You had better send some one here—a hired

nurse, if you will, who understands these scenes. I know nothing of death-beds or of deaths."

She almost snatched her cold hands away from him, and walking up to the fire-place, stood and stared down with a singular, blank sort of frightened expression into the fire.

*Dies starved!* What did the man mean by speaking like that? Why did he look at her so fixedly? Why did he stand there watching her now?

She held out her hands to the fire; but no warmth entered their suddenly-frozen veins. She tried to collect herself and speak; but the words died, inarticulate, upon her quivering lips.

*Dies starved!* Of all Doctor Crawford's little medical farrago, only those two words remained distinctly, horribly clear upon her memory. She knew that her face was—must be—ashen with that sick shudder at her heart, and bowed her head down abruptly in her clasped hands as she stood.

And good Doctor Crawford crept silently from the room, with his eyes quite overflowing for the handsome, devoted, faithful young woman, who in another twenty-four hours would be left without a protector in the world!

## CHAPTER II.

## THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS RESPECTABILITY.

THE winter day dragged on slower than any day had ever dragged in Honoria Forrester's life. Before the doctor's visit she had enjoyed her breakfast, and the blazing fire, and her hopes of speedy release, and the *Princesse Parisienne*; and now, with no greater burden on her mind than then, she sat cowering, cold and sick, before the hearth; longing, she, usually so strong in her own strength, for the arrival of the nurse; starting nervously at every muffled sound that reached her from the bark-covered street below.

Dies starved!

What, *what* did he mean her to understand by that? Was it indeed a common, natural death for people labouring under Mrs. Forsyth's disease? If the old man made use of the same terms in speaking of it to others, would those two sickening words rivet their attention as they had done hers? She knew that Mrs. Forsyth had not left her money as some of her relations hoped she would leave it. The sum of two thousand pounds was bequeathed to herself, a stranger, and the bulk of the property went to one rich and distant cousin, with whom none of the family had been on terms for years. How, if these relations, already prejudiced against her, should hear Doctor Crawford's description of the death? How, if they should whisper abroad the horrible suspicion that the dead woman had not been dealt fairly with in her illness?

"They could prove nothing," she cried, almost aloud, and clasping her hands till the nails, unfelt, made cruel marks upon her rigid palms. "Prove? What is to be proved? What a fool to my own fancy am I growing! Want of air and exercise are just giving me nerves like other women." She was right as a matter of simple fact here, however faulty in her ethics. "If my lungs had been breathing pure

air, and my stomach digesting its food rightly, I couldn't fear. I never have feared. Fear—what have I to fear? Haven't I nursed her as no servant, as very few daughters, would have done? Haven't I borne with her tempers night and day, soothed her, made her miserable life less miserable for the last two years? She was to die. Doctor Crawford says so. The disease was mortal. Why do I trouble myself about the technical term in which a doting old man chooses to speak of the symptoms of her death? Shall I be so much bettered by her death even? Is two thousand pounds in money anything like an equivalent for the hundred a year and home and luxuries I have now? Why, 'tis evident that I am a loser—that 'twas to my interest that my benefactress should not die. . . . Can those who have been wishing her dead, murdering her in their hearts for years, dare to raise a breath against me and the fidelity with which I have served her to the last?"

And still the fire would not give warmth to Honoria Forrester's clammy hands. Still she longed for the arrival of the hired nurse. Still she started nervously at every sound that reached her from the street below. Yes, the sick-room must be telling upon her; want of air and exercise must be lowering her muscular and nervous system, and giving her foolish, cowardly fancies, like other women.

Late in the afternoon the nurse-tender, from Doctor Crawford, was ushered into the room by Mary. "Now that it's too late, Mr. Thomas, and that all the nurse-tenders in England couldn't do missus an ounce of good!" She was a little mild-eyed, apple-faced woman, quite unlike the typical or Gampish London-nurse, and introduced herself apologetically to Miss Forrester in a whisper, as Mrs. Perigreen. Honoria, never a person of many words, received the announcement in absolute silence, and at once seated herself with her feet upon the fender, and in such a position as wholly prevented her new companion from watching her face.

But Mrs. Perigreen, accustomed to all eccentric workings of human nature under affliction, was not a whit chilled by the young lady's coldness. Poor young lady, had not Doctor Crawford said that she was losing the only friend she possessed in this dying woman, whom she had nursed with such devotion through her illness?

"Shall I bring you some tea, Miss, please?" she whispered,

by and by, after going to the patient's side and seeing that there she was not wanted. "A cup of tea would do you good, my dear. It is no use to take on so."

"My dear!" Honoria stared up blankly in the woman's face, and as she did so an odd, a most unwonted, feeling smote at her heart. She was thinking—God knows of what she was thinking, of what recollections of her past life, what laborious schemes for the future—when these strange and homely words fell on her ears, and in a moment her memory went back, with a start, to another death-chamber than this: a chamber in a squalid Paris garret, where the only woman's lips that had ever spoken to her with tenderness—her mother's—had stiffened, fourteen years before, in death.

"Well—yes; I'll have some tea," she answered shortly. "It'll do me good. But I am not taking on," Honoria Forrester never told one unnecessary lie, "I'm only tired and sick."

Then she turned away again, and never spoke when Mrs. Perigreen brought up her tea, but just swallowed it mechanically, and kept staring into the fire, as she had done so many hours that day, and with her face still resolutely turned from the sight of Mrs. Forsyth's dying form.

The doctor came again between seven and eight, and found his patient still in a kind of heavy stupor; neither better nor actually worse. With the change in Miss Forrester he was startled. Her eyes were dull and leaden; an unnatural, deep red glowed on her cheeks.

"You will be ill yourself, young lady," he remarked, as she followed him to the door. "You are worn down to the last stage of exhaustion. Let the nurse sit up to-night. I am as sure of her attention as I would be of yours; and do you go to your bed and sleep. Now take my advice."

"Doctor," she answered, in a hoarse whisper, "I don't want to think of myself at all, but of her. Is—is what you told me this morning true? She *can't* recover—the disease is always a fatal one?"

The great lustrous eyes looked so entreatingly into his, that Doctor Crawford softened like a child. What a heart, what a noble nature, had this beautiful young creature, of whom he had heard so many women—Mrs. Crawford among them—say such hard things! "The disease is not invariably a fatal one, my dear young lady; but Mrs. Forsyth has reached

a point now from which recovery is utterly impossible. When once certain glands become, as I explained to you this morning, invaded with disease, neither medicine nor food can pass into the blood, and the patient——” but he stopped himself short before the blanched horror of his listener’s face.

“And you know that this—that this is now Mrs. Forsyth’s case?” she stammered.

“I know it: I knew it long ago,” he answered. “When Chandos and I held our first consultation—five, six weeks ago, was it not?—our opinions precisely agreed. Mrs. Forsyth had every symptom then of a disease from which there could be no recovery.”

“Thank you. I know the worst now. I can bear it.”

She went back into the room, walked straight up to the bed-side, and looked steadfastly down, as she had once before done that day, upon her patient. “And so, it was to be,” she thought. “And so this wonderful disease that makes people die starved had, after all, set in weeks ago! What a fool, what a contemptible coward, my own wretched fancy has made of me! What a life it is, in which two chance words, dropped from an old man’s garrulous lips, can palsy a stout human being’s nerves, and chill the blood for a day! I was in my sane senses this morning when I said that it would be cruelty, not mercy, to hold back such an existence as this. I say it now. Life is for the strong; money is for the strong. If I was in her place who lies here, how would I thank any one who should strive to hold me to my miserable mockery of existence? And to think that I have been sentimentalising—I! during a whole afternoon—almost wishing her well and myself in chains again, and well-nigh melting into tears, like a provincial at the play, when yonder little lachrymose professional hypocrite spoke to me just now! By the way, that reminds me. From her dress and manner I should judge her to be a Methodist, so it would be well to lock up the jewel-cases without delay.”

The little professional hypocrite, quite unconscious either of Methodism or dishonesty, was meekly standing at the bottom of the bed chafing the patient’s feet as she had been ordered; and her kind homely face lit up as she watched the poor young lady “make an effort,” and commence busying herself about the room.

Mrs. Forsyth was the possessor of a small fortune in pre-



cious stones, all of which were unlocked in various cases upon the dressing-table—for in the earlier stages of her illness she had liked to have her trinkets at hand, spreading them out daily on the bed, as a sick child would his toys—and it was a work of time for Miss Forrester to arrange them all in their places as Mrs. Forsyth herself used to keep them. These jewels were uncatalogued, and only included, with other personal property, in the will; and Miss Forrester knew that it was so. And she was needy; and money, as a means, was her god; and here were diamond rings and crosses without number, and it needed but to turn her back and hide a hundred pounds' worth or so away, and no man be the wiser. But the desire, the imagination even, never crossed her brain. To each temperament is its temptation. Small larcenies, such as some virtuous and even high-born ladies have succumbed to, were not among Honoria's. She put every smallest thing of worth away as carefully as Mrs. Forsyth's own daughter could have done; fastened the keys belonging to the different cases to her own watch-chain; and then stowed away the cases themselves into a secret drawer of one of the bureaux, of which she also took the key.

This done, she went back to her place beside the fire. It was a bitterly cold night; even into that curtained room the piercing breath of the sleet-charged north wind made its way; but the high-piled fire roared with as merry a sound as though a jovial winter party, instead of two silent watchers of a dying woman, were assembled beside it: and the little kettle on the hob purred cheerily; and the crickets chirped, defiant and blithe and ceaseless, as I think only thorough-bred London crickets can.

"I always like that sound, Miss," observed the little nurse in a professional undertone. She had given up the Sisyphus-like task of attempting to bring back warmth to feet that never should be warm again, and was sitting with a well-worn book in her hand beside the fire. "Don't you, Miss, please? It sounds so cheery and home-like."

"What sound?" said Miss Forrester, to whom domestic sentiment was an entirely untrodden field; "the snow beating on the window, or the kettle boiling over?"

"Well, Miss, I like to hear the kettle droning too; but what I meant was the crickets. Whenever I hear them it seems to me like my own home again; and then, sitting

up night after night, sick-tending and watching of the dead, Miss, one feels glad of any company, even a dumb thing like a cricket."

Miss Forrester was not devoid of an occasional hard interest in the weaknesses of other human beings; above all, a simple sort of human creature reposing blandly on old beliefs and prejudices, had power to arrest her fancy. She looked down at this little apple-faced woman, who babbled about crickets with her Prayer-book (of course it must be a Prayer-book) on her knee; this wretched woman who spent her time patiently rubbing sick people's feet, and breathing sick people's horrible atmosphere, and thought she would amuse herself for a minute by hearing what views such a being could possibly have of life.

"Not a very cheerful profession yours, Mrs. Perigreen. What made you take to it—choice or necessity?"

"Well, Miss—but please do you take a chair. I don't like to see you stand. It was necessity first, and now I believe I may say it's choice. I've got used to the sick and their ways; and Doctor Crawford and Doctor Chandos both recommend me; and, except for breaking of rest, I've nothing to complain of; and next year, please God, my daughter Sarah is off my hands, I hope to lay by a bit, and——"

"Ah," interrupted Honoria, who abhorred prolixity, "and in the meantime you have your religious trust, no doubt, to sustain you. I am glad to see that you read your Prayer-book regularly, Mrs. Perigreen."

The little nurse blushed crimson. "Well, Miss," she said, "I do read my Prayer-book occasionally, as I trust we all do; but this isn't one. I hope you won't take it amiss that I should open such a book in a sick-room; but every night of my life, since I lost my son, I've read, if it's only a few lines, out of it for his sake. He was washed overboard coming from Australia, Miss, and one of his mates sent me a parrot he was bringing home for me and this book. It's called *Gulliver's Travels*, and I can't say I make much out of it, or indeed that it's altogether to my mind; still, Miss, you see it was his favourite book, and all I have left of him—for the parrot got choked on a hazel-nut, two years ago come Michaelmas, and he was my only son as lived to be a man."

Miss Forrester was silent. The little mild-faced woman making her Talmud out of *Gulliver's Travels* for her dead

son's sake, did not appeal to her sense of the ridiculous as any orthodox exposition of piety would infallibly have done.

"As long as my boy lived I kept up at the dress-making," went on Mrs. Perigreen, looking very apologetic for speaking about herself at all, "so that he might have a home to come to between his voyages; but when I lost him I hadn't the heart like to care for housekeeping any longer; and, besides, my eyes were too bad to work at night for a good time after I heard of his death, and one and another said, 'Try nurse-tending, Mrs. Perigreen, it'll take your thoughts off more than any work;' and that's how I began it, Miss, and have never been disengaged, except once when I caught the fever and was took to the hospital, since."

"And are contented, no doubt. Want for nothing on earth, Mrs. Perigreen?"

The woman looked at her wistfully. "I want nothing particular now," she answered, "but to say this is what I once thought I should come to would be untrue. Why, when I married, I'd as much linen as would go into two of those biggest presses, and as neat a parlour as any farmer's wife in Essex, and a girl to do my hard work. And we should have gone on well, and I should have my family round me now, instead of being a lone woman as you see me, but for one thing, and that was money."

"Or rather the want of it, I suppose?" suggested Miss Forrester.

"No, no, Miss. Money, ill-gotten money, money that hardened my husband's heart—him that was once so fond of his children:—and preyed on his mind, for he knew it was ill-gotten, and drove him at last to take to the drink that ruined him and all of us! He had an old father, Miss," she went on in a whisper, and looking nervously towards the patient's bed, "as old, perhaps, as your poor lady, or older, and one elder brother; and one morning the old man was found dead quite unexpectedly in his bed. It was an out-of-the-way place, and there was no crowner's inquest nor nothing; but all the country people said, and say still, the old man didn't come to his end by fair means; and for all they were so respectably off, it was found the son had entered him for four burial clubs, two of them not a month before his death. Well, my husband he heard what was being said, and one night just after the funeral, when his brother was at our house, he up and told

him, and as good as threatened to have the old man's body taken up and postmortumed. And Robert—I mind his face as well as if I see it yesterday—Robert talked him down, and says he 'the old man's lived long enough, and his life did no good to himself nor no one else.' And then he went on, bit by bit, to offering my husband a good share of the money, hush-money, blood-money as it was! Well, Miss, after he was gone, I begged and prayed, and went down on my knees beside the children's bed, and besought him never to touch a shilling that came out of Robert's hand, and he said he wouldn't. But he was a weak man, although as good a heart as God ever made: and we were a little behind with our rent at that time: and a few days later he used bitter words again to Robert about the old man's death: and Robert tempted him again with money to keep him silent, and—he fell! From that day till he died, I never see one happy smile upon his face again."

"And Robert?" asked Miss Forrester, interested, in spite of herself.

"Robert, Miss, never had heart nor conscience neither; consequently his guilt couldn't prey. Robert's living respected, now, with a good business in malt near Deptford. I wouldn't go nigh him; I wouldn't break bread of his if I was starving on the streets; but my girl tells me that her uncle Robert's getting quite the gentleman, and sending his eldest daughter—God pity the child!—to boarding-school."

"Which shows clearly how inestimable a blessing a conscience is," said Miss Forrester, drily. "Thank you for the story, Mrs. Perigreen, and please light up a fire in the dressing-room. I shall try to get an hour or two's rest, while you keep watch over Mrs. Forsyth."

But she turned her eyes shortly away towards the fire as she spoke, and held them there till the nurse had obeyed her orders, and returned again to her post beside the bed. She was not superstitious; she was not sensitive: but the persistence with which one class of ideas seemed thrust upon her to-day oppressed her horribly. First, the maundering old man with those words of his that had haunted her so for hours, and now this simpleton with her details of blood-money, and scared conscience, and tardy retribution. Would these twenty-four hours never go by? Would another day never dawn?—another fresh, vigorous young day, the beginning of a new free life, unoppressed by these contemptible nightmares, by these four

prison-walls, by that ghastly dying face, which, while she shuddered to look at it, she yet had not the courage to give over utterly into the keeping of another.

The maxim of Honoria Forrester's life, her sole moral code, her theology, her by-stay, was work. In crises wherein women of ordinary faiths would take laudanum, or prostrate themselves before a saint, living or dead, she employed her fingers and found consolation; the desire for self-forgetfulness, attaining self-forgetfulness, in short, indifferent of the particular form or ritual observed. She had work before her now; work that she had always told herself must be accomplished at Mrs. Forsyth's death; and, after giving the nurse a strict parting injunction, to call her at the slightest change that should take place in the patient, she went into the dressing-room, locked the door noiselessly that communicated from it into the sick chamber, and began her task.

It was a lengthened one—the sorting, and in most cases burning, all her letters and relics of the last ten years. Vitally important though it was that no evidence of her past career should exist, she had never yet been able to bring herself to destroy these things. During her distasteful, frightfully-monotonous bondage to Mrs. Forsyth it had been her one pleasure, her breathing-space, her ten minutes of life, out of each twenty-four hours of stagnant vegetation, to steal away to her own room and open her boxes and gaze at, and read over the trophies of that buried past whose very existence had become a thing to be ashamed of and ignored. But she was too acutely foreseeing to succumb to any such sentimentalism now. At the onset of Mrs. Forsyth's illness she had had all her possessions brought into this dressing-room, to which she alone had access. In her lonely watches—watches, when she would sit casting up every possible mischance or combination of mischances that might occur to her—she had decided that every compromising letter, every suspicious scrap of paper, every address, every card that she possessed, must be burnt before the hour of Mrs. Forsyth's death. Why, the first act of the next of kin might be to have her things searched before allowing them to leave the house; and then, if a hint of the truth once got whispered abroad, adieu to the whole scheme, whose fair fabric she had been diligently building up for months—for years past! Every thing that could by possibility bear witness against her—every thing belonging to the

old—must be destroyed; and this was the moment for their destroyal.

She waited till the fire had kindled up with a steady roaring blaze, then unlocked her boxes, and one by one took out and spread upon the floor every letter, every relic, that was to constitute the holocaust.

Of notes, mostly glossy coroneted notes, there were scores and scores. Some written in crabbed German, some few in English, the vast majority in French. Heaps of these she burnt without a glance; a dozen she lingered over; three she read through before throwing them in the fire. This was the bulk of her correspondence. Then came a small packet of letters, all of which she read before destroying, and out of whose number two or three were put aside and kept. And then came the hardest to destroy of all—her relics.

These relics consisted almost entirely of chaplets and bouquets, so withered now that they crumbled beneath the touch, so shrunk out of all likeness to flowers that it was impossible even to herself to remember whether these lifeless mummies had once been odorous crowns of myrtle or costly bouquets of roses, camellias, and azalias. Surely no ball-going young lady ever kept so many faded flowers as Miss Forrester did, or treated them with such care; for most of these skeletons of old triumphs were hoarded in a separate box, and all of them were labelled, "The duc D'A——," "Prince L——," "Lord——." This was the kind of label each bouquet bore.

Well, she gathered them together, approached the fire with a sort of effort and burnt them, feeling, as the flames flickered for a moment higher, much as some young women feel who, on the eve of an excellent marriage, burn up, for safety, all record of the foolish, unprofitable, moneyless, happy past. Then she opened a cardboard box, somewhat larger than the others, and with reverent hands took out what her whole face and gesture showed to be her crowning treasure, her pet idolatry,—that to her which *Gulliver's Travels* was to the little nurse in the adjoining room. A faded bouquet still, or rather a small crown of faded flowers; but with this difference from the rest, that a diamond agrafe sparkled amidst the dead leaves, and that it was labelled in Honoria's own French-looking-hand, with these intoxicating words, "SA MAJESTÉ!" No date was here. None was needed. It was written in her

heart. No further explanation of the gift, or of the giver, "SA MAJESTÉ."

She raised the chaplet, tenderly disengaging the agrafe from its stem, and took off the label. These, of course, she could keep. What story is there in a diamond agrafe in a jewel-box and a scrap of paper containing the words *Sa Majesté* in a writing-desk? But it cut her to the very soul to have to do so; to think that she would never more feast her eyes on that wreath, and that agrafe, and those two words in their delicious juxtaposition! and to think that they were hers, and to remember the heavenly hour in which they first became so! She had burnt the letters of old familiar associates without an emotion; but genuine tears came in her eyes as she pressed her lips on the flower-stalks that had once left the scarcely less sapless hand of royalty itself. As tender as she could feel for any thing, she felt when, a minute later, *Sa Majesté's* gift made the flame for a second leap up higher, as its predecessors had done.

The work of destruction over, Miss Forrester had to think of another subject, and a more important one still; the letters it behoved her to keep. They were not numerous; and whereas the former letters were all addressed in French, these were invariably directed in plain English, "Miss Honoria Forrester, care of Miss Jarvis, The Cedars, Peckham."

Half-a-dozen of them were directed in one hand: an unformed woman's hand, more French than English; and one of these Honoria opened and read through. It bore the same burden as so many family letters, even among the most respectable persons, do bear—a request for money; contained allusions to failing strength, laborious work, and cruel friends, and was signed "Nita." Honoria Forrester smiled as she read it; then she made these letters up into a little packet, labelled them (mixing plenty of water with the ink, to give it a faded look) "from my unhappy sister Nita," and put them away again in her desk. A note or two from Mrs. Forsyth, also addressed "Miss Forrester, Peckham," and written just before engaging her as companion, she laid side by side with "Nita's;" also a book-marker, marked in blue beads, "for my dear teacher, Honoria Forrester;" an inexpensive pamphlet "On the Eternity of Punishment," presented to Miss Forrester as a mark of esteem by the Reverend Alfred Prettyman, at the examination of Miss Jarvis's pupils, Peck-

ham, July 185—; and one or two bills, so trifling in amount that it seemed ridiculous to keep them any longer, for dress, rendered to Miss Honoria Forrester, The Cedars, Peckham.

Nothing remained now but five or six notes, recently written, in a bold thoroughly English hand, and addressed to Harley Street. She read them all through, and tossed them down in bitter disgust, as she thought how little there was in them to read. "Dear Miss Forrester,—Could you make any use of a box at the Opera to-night? Yours, Henry Bryanstone," being a fair average specimen of their length and style. "No good to keep them," she thought; "things that could neither benefit me nor compromise him. Cold, stupid, measured like himself, and the rest of his hateful nation!" She crunched each viciously between her hands before flinging it (a pity Mr. Bryanstone could not have seen the gesture!) into the fire; then she fastened up her cases; noiselessly unlocked the bed-room door, pinned up her hair,—she would have done that, I believe, on the eve of a certain day of judgment,—and laid herself down upon the sofa and slept.

Yes, slept. With the sound sweet sleep of vigorous animal health; untroubled by dreams of former triumphs, or nightmares of present fears; of "Sa Majesté," or Henry Bryanstone, or the patient who was "dying starved!"

Mrs. Perigreen has since averred that, when she stole in early next morning to break to her how, without change or struggle, the patient's spirit had left this valley of tears, a smile, such as a blessed new-born baby or angel above might wear, was on that poor young lady's innocent, sleeping face!



## CHAPTER III.

## "WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK."

MORE than a fortnight had elapsed since Mrs. Forsyth's death. The blinds were still decorously half-drawn, thereby marking the transitioned, or resigned, stage of grief; and in the dim light of the great silent drawing-room Miss Forrester sat alone, one rainy afternoon, and communed within herself as to what should be her next step in life.

For she had not been turned out of the house, neither had her boxes been searched. Had the wishes of the enraged next of kin been carried out, these and other good offices would have been duly performed for her within a very short time after the reading of Mrs. Forsyth's will. But the distant cousin who inherited was in a position to be generous. Did not the doctor say that the girl was a good girl, and had nursed her mistress faithfully? Was it a worthy thing for the family to be jealous of, or in any way question, the poor bequest of two thousand pounds to a personal attendant?

"Mighty fine talking for John, who has got everything!" said all the disappointed relations.) For himself, he saw no reason to think badly of Miss Forrester. Many young women in her position would from time to time have got hold of some of the personal property; and even Mrs. Forsyth's own sister allowed that the jewels were intact. Miss Forrester was quite at liberty to make use of the house in Harley-street for a month; after which time his wife and daughters would come up from Yorkshire and spend the season ("Mrs. John spend the season!" sneered all the other relations) in town.

Miss Forrester accepted the offer, and was glad of it. It gave her position for the time being, and no one knew better than she did the value of that word; still it gave her no more. Mrs. Forsyth's death had insured to her £2000 and freedom.

But she wanted a great deal more than this to attain to what she desired. She wanted friends, and she had no friends; she wanted a woman's hand to uphold her and bring her forward in society, and no such hand presented, or was likely to present itself.

Was the whole scheme beyond her powers? she asked herself, as she paced restlessly up and down the handsome drawing-room, in her handsome black silk and crape. Should she throw it up, take her two thousand pounds thankfully, go back again to the Continent, fly at the smaller game of which she was certain, and throw her ambitious dream of English society, and English money, and an English marriage to the winds?

I daresay most ambitious men have, if they would confess it, these moments of weakness and discouragement. We read only the record of success; but how do we know what the Duke felt before Waterloo, or Napoleon before Austerlitz? Honoria Forrester, in common with all inborn adventurers, was fatalistic. She did not consult a little five-sous Book of Fate, like the Emperor of the French, but she allowed circumstances to be her oracle. Many excellent persons under difficulty open their Koran or Talmud, according to their country, and from whatsoever passage the forefinger of the right hand chance to rest upon, receive or make to themselves counsel. Miss Forrester, who prided herself on her absence of superstition, was making up for herself a like cabalistic process at this moment.

"London is wide and dreary," she thought, looking out with a shudder into the foggy street, "and, barring one chance, the game of stopping here is not worth the candle. What does English society want with me, or I with it? I have my fortune, my two thousand pounds, safe—not a bad payment for my two years of slavery!—so far, what I went in for I have won. Now comes the question, how far this English mine may safely be worked? In everything about this house I am right. She has been dead a fortnight, and the will has been read, and the doctor has declared me before all the family to be an angel, and the heir allows me to remain four weeks under his roof. But with Bryanstone it looks bad—bad! A fortnight, and he has left his card once to inquire: no note, no message; nothing but this. And do I care if I get him? If I was married to him would I be really

better off? Of course I would, because I would have name and money! But Grand Dieu! how much slavery with it?—yes, slavery! Visit-paying, dinner-eating, church-going, card-leaving, senseless lying of all kinds. If I levanted now, I should have my two thousand pounds and be free. I've not aged a bit: I look younger than when I came here first; and I utilize all the fine mourning they've given me, and go to Rome as a widow—the widow of an American officer newly killed. I always wanted to be in Rome in Holy Week, and I'd pick up Fifine on my way for duenna (she must be old enough for anything now), and take a grand apartment, and perhaps find a better thing—English, too, very likely—than Mr. Henry Bryanstone, with his handsome face, and his insolence, and his prospective baronetcy. I must be in second weeds, or I should have to wear my hair plain—second weeds, and sent to Europe in the hope of recovering my health. No one could find out anything about a widow from America in time to spoil my game, and grief is one of the things I do best; and if it comes to nothing, I'd go on to Naples and look up little Taroni and have some play. I resolve it! Unless I hear from Bryanstone between this and to-morrow night, I leave London, with precious little regret for it or him."

But the churches of Rome were not destined to see Miss Forrester among their Pascal worshippers that year. The final decision had scarcely passed through her mind, before a carriage stopped at the door of Mrs. Forsyth's house. In another minute a card containing the words "Mrs. Fairfax," was in Miss Forrester's hand.

"At home? of course I'm at home!" she exclaimed to the open-mouthed charwoman who had brought the card up, suspiciously, like a natural curiosity, in the corner of her apron. (Mr. Thomas's admirable proportions had at once secured him other plush, and the women-servants, one and all had marched straight out of the house as soon as their mistress was buried.) "Of course I'm at home. Go down this moment, and show the lady in, you foolish old woman."

She flew to the glass; all her dreams of Rome and widowhood dispelled in a moment by the unsuspected excitement of this excellent reality; she passed her hand rapidly, but with a firm hand, over her cheeks; she pushed back her hair as plain and flat as it would go from her forehead. For the first time

in her life she didn't care if she looked hideous. All that she instinctively felt she needed was, to look respectable. For Mrs. Fairfax was Henry Bryanstone's sister.

"A lady, ma'am," announced the charwoman, looking furtively round the door first, after the manner of her kind; and then there sounded a little condescending cough, and the rustle of sweeping silks, and Mr. Bryanstone's sister walked in.

She was a very small, very pretty, very English-looking woman, dressed in a prodigiously training green silk, a velvet mantle that nearly covered her, a pink bonnet, and light gloves. You could not call her anything but pretty, for she was very pretty, beautiful almost, when you examined the clear-cut little features line by line. She had a perfectly-formed nose and mouth, a smooth high forehead, the complexion at thirty of a girl, and a pair of very wide-open, nut-brown eyes.

"But all for nothing!" thought Honoria, taking her measure in an instant: "A nonsense-woman, that men would call pretty, weary of in five minutes, and never look at again. "Madame," advancing with her suave foreign manner, "allow me to offer you a place." After which she stood calmly self-possessed, but perfectly respectful; while little Mrs. Fairfax, who wanted to patronise her, coloured up to the eyes like a school-girl, and passed on into a chair.

"I called, Miss Forrester, to—my brother has mentioned that you were in want of a situation."

"Madame, I have newly lost my only friend." Miss Forrester said this with a foreign accent, and her lips quivered a little as she spoke. Decidedly grief was one of the things she did best.

"So I have heard." And now Mrs. Fairfax began to take Honoria's measure in her turn; and she decided, poor little woman! that the girl was quite plain—hideous sandy hair, and a thick waist. "Indeed, my cousin, Lady Lemmington, knew your employer well, and often spoke to me about her illness; and—these things must be submitted to, Miss Forrester. We must kiss the chastening rod. Every earthly trial we meet with is for our eternal good, and so you'll find in time, although I wouldn't for one moment lead you to expect you'll have such a salary again. As I said to Henry, Mrs. Forsyth was eccentric."

"Madame," said Honoria, looking through her downcast eyelashes into Mrs. Fairfax's face, "I don't desire a salary. It

is indifferent to me if I enter into another English family or not; but if I do so, it will be for a home only. By Mrs. Forsyth's generosity I am placed quite above the necessity for work for the future."

"O! and you mean to return to France, then, I suppose?" asked Mrs. Fairfax, taken a good deal aback, as Honoria intended she should be.

"I am uncertain. My friends all want me to return; but I think perhaps I may stay in England yet another year. It depends upon my hearing of a situation likely to suit me."

Mrs. Fairfax fidgeted with the folds of her rustling silk, gave a little cough again, and looked into the fire. She was mean to her heart's core, this woman, who possessed three or four thousand a-year, at least; and to get a yard of calico below the market-price, or a governess who only wanted a "nominal" salary, was just about the strongest temptation her hard, little, narrow nature could sustain. And Honoria had guessed at this (I can no more tell you how than she could have told you herself. Are women's flashes of intelligence respecting each other ever capable of analysis?), and had thrown out her lure accordingly.

"You are accustomed to tuition, Miss Forrester? I think I've heard you filled a position of the kind before you went to Mrs. Forsyth?"

"Madame, I lived for seven years as pupil-teacher and governess in a school—the Miss Jarvises', at Peckham."

"And you instruct in French and German, of course?"

"French I speak the same, better for accent, than English, for my mother was a Frenchwoman, and I was born and brought up in Paris."

"And German and Italian?"

"I can instruct in them—yes."

"Music, of course?"

"Of course."

"And dancing?"

"Madame, no. I was not aware that dancing would ever be required from a resident governess."

"O, indeed it is, Miss Forrester. My cousin, Lady Lemington, has a little treasure of a Swiss woman who teaches French, music, dancing, the rudiments of drawing, and sees to Freddy and Algernon's wardrobes. You will find dancing in-

variably required, or so much knowledge of it, at least, as to be able to prepare your pupils for the dancing-master."

"Then I should be forced to confess my deficiency," said Miss Forrester, quietly. "French, music, and the rudiments of German and Italian, are my only accomplishments."

"Which of course must make your expectations very moderate as regards salary, very moderate indeed. Ahem! . . . If—if—my own children are at present without a governess, Miss Forrester, my inestimable treasure, Miss Bailey, having gone away in a consumption, and what I was going to say is, that if you were willing to undertake the charge for a time, I should be glad to offer you a home. It is, I need scarcely say, a very easy place; my daughters being but ten and eleven years of age, and only two of the younger ones—boys—having as yet left the nursery. You would find them all delightfully-dispositioned children, and could keep as much to yourself as you chose, except at any time that I might require music in the drawing-room."

Miss Forrester slightly bowed, then turned her head away and rested her firm, square chin on her hand. "I must look irresolute," she thought; "must mention money, or, fool as she is, she may suspect me of jumping at it too readily. Madame," aloud, "your offer touches me—the more because it is made when I am in grief and alone—but I must tell you frankly I know nothing about the training of boys, and it would also be out of my power to undertake the charge of so many children without adequate remuneration."

"And pray what do you call adequate remuneration?" asked Mrs. Fairfax, getting on her feet, as she found it "told" to do in shops at the more delicate crisis of a bargain. "What do you call adequate remuneration, in addition to a comfortable home and the occasional advantages of society that I offer to you?"

"I could not ask you less than thirty pounds a year, Madame. For society," and she glanced at her black dress, "I have no inclination whatever."

Mrs. Fairfax's heart swelled with triumph. The inestimable treasure had cost her fifty pounds without German or music!

"Thirty pounds a year is a very large sum for such a governess as I require; indeed," making half a step towards the door, "I don't know, as your expectations are so high, there is much use in prolonging our interview. If you were willing,—

perfectly willing, mind, I don't press you, there are dozens who would be glad of the place—you might have the girls and Alic only. Dicky, dear lamb! as you've such an objection to little boys, should remain in the nursery for the present, and I would give you twenty pounds a year."

Miss Forrester hesitated; Mrs. Fairfax re-considered; and finally each got what she desired: the rich lady, a dirt-cheap instructress for her children; the adventuress, a footing in the house of Henry Bryanstone's family. Dicky, dear lamb! was to remain in the nursery; and Miss Forrester was to receive the emolument of twenty-five pounds per annum.

"On the subject of religion and morality I think it well to be explicit," said Mrs. Fairfax, when the graver matter of money had been concluded. "You are not a Catholic, I presume, Miss Forrester?"

"O, dear no," replied Honoria, readily; "certainly not a Catholic."

"Very well. Then you will take the children to church on Sunday and communicate regularly yourself every three months. Have you any objection?"

"Not the slightest." But I will do Miss Forrester justice. She had not the faintest idea what she was promising. "You will find me ready to follow out your domestic regulations in everything."

"And you will see that Sunday is strictly kept in the nursery. As you have been brought up abroad, I mention things I should not think it necessary to do to an English-woman. No toys, no idle conversation of any kind, and the epistle, gospel, and collect from each of your pupils."

Miss Forrester bowed.

"And you, yourself, Miss Forrester—this is a delicate subject, but one on which I think it right to institute inquiries—are you, and I ask it solemnly, awakened?"

"Madame?" and now Honoria's hesitation was real. She had a vague idea that the question meant, was she wide-awake, and could not instantly resolve upon an answer, "I—I hope I am," was the safest thing she could hit upon; and Mrs. Fairfax received it with melancholy silence: shaking her head as though she would say that hope on such a subject was not worth much.

"I make a regular allowance for washing," she continued, "and the school-room tea and sugar will be under your charge."

Once a day at present, and twice in summer, you will accompany the children in their walk—and that brings me, I think, to the end of all I've got to say. You will, of course, receive no followers of any kind without my especial sanction, Miss Forrester?"

"Madame, I have none to receive."

"And you can come to me at once, to-morrow afternoon, if you choose. That, I think, concludes our interview. *Good morning.*" She just touched Honoria's hand with the tips of her fingers; then swept the folds of her gorgeous skirt around her; and rustled out of the room.

"And that is his sister!" soliloquised Miss Forrester, when she was alone. "That is a woman with money, position, character, home, husband, children. I'm better—I swear I am! I could commit what she would call a crime and faint at, but I couldn't grind down a wretched governess to the last penny, and seal the bargain with a text. No! Live with her? Not to win a dozen Henry Bryanstones. I'd get dangerous in such an air. I'd take her by the neck some day, when she was chattering in her stony voice, and looking at me with those brown-bead eyes, and stifle her—just for the fun of seeing how such creatures die. Three weeks, a fortnight will be long enough, with decent luck, for me to do my work. Then a grand crash, and Bryanstone, if he has any of a man's nature in him, must be on my side.

"At all events," after a few minutes' pause, "luck is going with me now. I said unless I heard from Bryanstone I would leave London to-morrow. I have heard from him, and I remain. The first step is taken in earnest. By this time to-morrow I shall be under his sister's roof.

"And I did intend to burn my letters, after all. That woman is capable of anything."



## CHAPTER IV.

## A GOOD THING IN GOVERNESSES.

"Yes, poor thing, she's very plain, and there's something dull and depressed about her manner, but perhaps that'll wear off in time. On the whole, considering what creatures governesses are, I think I must thank you, Henry, for having told me of her. About her French accent there can be no mistake, and that, after poor old Bailey's Yorkshire, will be a great thing for the children. Yes, taking it altogether, and considering above all how plain and steady-looking she is, I do think this Miss Forrester is likely to suit me."

The speaker was Mrs. Fairfax; the scene her husband's smoking-room, to which, when no one was with them, Letty made it her habit to accompany him after dinner. "No one" was with them to-day (that is to say, only her brother, Henry Bryanstone and Laura Hamilton), and Mrs. Fairfax was just at this moment entertaining the little *partie carrée* with a lively description of Miss Forrester, the new governess, who had entered the house about three hours previously, and of her own great address and sagacity in the way she had engaged her.

"But I cannot think why you deceived me so about her appearance, Henry. You led me to think, somehow, that she must be so handsome, and when I saw her I really almost exclaimed. Straw-coloured hair, my dear Laura, cut short in front like a boy's, and a waist—O, dear me—that would make up your waist and mine put together. Henry has the strangest taste in beauty, I must say."

Laura Hamilton gave a little short laugh. "Mr. Bryanstone's taste has always been for the blondest of blondes," she remarked. "Do you remember Lulu Thomson? You and I, Letty, could never see any beauty whatever in her, and yet—"

"Lulu Thomson," cried Bryanstone, taking his cigar from his lips, and looking round at Mrs. Hamilton. "Well, hang it! give me my due and no more. Lulu was Richard's love from beginning to end, not mine. Richard, wake up," he went on, addressing a heavy peaceful-looking young man, with long fair whiskers, large white hands, and a scanty development of hair, who was dozing, a pipe in his mouth, by the fire. "Wake up, Dick, and answer for yourself. Was Lulu Thomson one of your loves or mine?"

"Lulu Thomson? why, mine to be sure," and Richard Fairfax opened wide a great pair of curiously-pale, china-blue eyes. "We saw her at the Sheffield races, you may remember, and got introduced, and I made all the running while you were showing little De Basompierre some of the amusements of an English race-course. What's up now? Letty not jealous again, I hope?" And he held his hands high up over his ears, and looked at the little woman, who came about up to his elbow when they stood together, with the profoundest assumption of moral and physical cowardice.

Letty took it all with great good-humour; but in her heart registered one of the small oaths she never broke to repay her dear friend Laura for the speech. Jealousy was Letty's master-passion (next to meanness), and Mrs. Hamilton knew it, and had purposely mentioned the bitter sound of Lulu Thomson's name. But why had Letty dared to say before her that Henry Bryanstone had the strangest taste in beauty? I record these young women's feelings, and what they thought and said of each other, simply as these things arose. But don't suppose they were on any other than genial and excellent terms. They were the next best thing to friends that exists—intimate foes. A thousand common hopes, a thousand common rivalries, and the strictest, never-sleeping, armed neutrality had held Laura Hamilton and Letty together without one open rupture during the last three years.

"No, I was not very jealous of poor Miss Thomson," went on Mrs. Fairfax, playfully, "and I don't think I'm very likely to be so of Honoria Forrester. Richard, were you asleep when I was telling them about the children's new governess? She speaks French better than English, and begins them in music and German, and she is a very steady-looking person, older than me, I'm sure, and very plain."

"That I quite believe if you engaged her for your gover-

ness. But—" and here Mr. Fairfax looked hard into the fire, and seemed to be bringing his brain up to the unwonted difficulty of struggling with an idea—"is this the girl that lived with old Mrs. Forsyth? Why, she's handsome—deuced handsome! Don't you remember, Henry, the night I saw her with you? She'd got Letty's box, hadn't she? Letty was in the country, and you and I—"

"No, no, no. You're dreaming, Dick!" interrupted Bryanstone quickly. "You're thinking of Lady Augusta Bethel, the fair woman with short hair on her forehead."

"I remember her! Lady Augusta Bethel, of course," said Mr. Fairfax, who possessed the enormous advantage of looking a very much greater fool than he was. "Augusta and Honoria—well, they both end with an 'a,' don't they?"

Mrs. Fairfax looked up with her searching brown eyes into both their faces. "You are talking a great deal of nonsense to-night," she remarked sharply; or I should *hope* it's nonsense. I should *hope* Henry never lent my box in my absence to any persons of objectionable character." Mrs. Fairfax's eyes flashed ominously.

"Objectionable character!" repeated Bryanstone, in his quiet way. "You don't mean to say you are taking a person of that sort to bring up the children? No, never mind, Letty," for the blood was in Letty's cheeks. "It's only Richard's nonsense—that horrid way he has of getting every one into mischief. I know no more about Miss Forrester than you do, except seeing her a few times with old Mrs. Forsyth. You must have seen her too, Mrs. Hamilton: a fair-haired or straw-coloured-haired young woman, as Letty says. Don't you remember her at the Armytage's theatricals?"

"I think I do," said Mrs. Hamilton, indifferently. "She paid a good deal of attention to old Sir John Armytage, if I remember rightly. O, she *was* good-looking, Letty. Execrable style, a third-rate French actress, but a decidedly handsome face."

Now Laura Hamilton remembered Honoria well, not only at the Armytage's theatricals, but on several other occasions: at a flower-show; in the park; above all, on that night at the Opera when Bryanstone had lent her Letty's box (for Richard's recollections were right), and on nearly all of these occasions Mr. Bryanstone had chanced to be at her side. With a spasm of jealousy she heard that Miss Forrester had gained access to

the Fairfaxes' house, and to the constant opportunity of meeting Bryanstone; a spasm of silent jealousy quite unlike what one of Letty's tornado gusts of that passion would have been; a spasm of uncomplaining mute jealousy such as for years past she had been suffering on Bryanstone's account; jealousy such as all women past thirty must, alas! accept as their inevitable daily portion when they are fools enough still to regard a young, and sought-after, and handsome man with sentiment.

And Mrs. Hamilton was a great deal past thirty, as much past it-indeed as it is possible for a woman ever to be; and what is worse, looked her age, except under very exceptional and favourable circumstances indeed. Her black hair was rich and plentiful as ever; her large, almond-shaped teeth were white as snow; her hands and arms beautiful. For the rest, Mrs. Hamilton was a *passée* woman, and she succumbed to it, spoke of it, acknowledged her (approximate) age to you frankly, was genial in her manner to girls, a good comrade with men, and only accidentally, when some new infidelity of Bryanstone's was in the bud, or when Letty irritated her beyond endurance, ever launched forth into bitterness or detraction of any other woman's superior youth or looks.

She had been on the same close terms of intimacy with Henry Bryanstone for nearly four years. Deep in her heart, guarded jealously even from her own reason, there lurked the forlorn hope of some day marrying him. He had never given her the slightest foundation for such a belief, indeed to no other woman had he ever been so free in expressing the precise nature of his regard as to Mrs. Hamilton. "It's her greatest charm," he used to say: "the one thing that prevents you tiring of her as you do of all the rest, she never degenerates into love-making." But not one woman in five thousand is capable, as nearly all men are, of friendship that can remain friendship. Not one unmarried woman in five thousand, whatever her age or appearance, is capable of close intimacy with a handsome and intellectual man, without some vain delusive *mirage* of marriage floating before her brain. Mrs. Hamilton had an unusual quantity of common-sense, and she understood Bryanstone thoroughly. She had not the slightest idea of his offering to marry her now; she knew indeed that such a thought had never entered into his mind; but what she did hope, that made her bear all his neglect with uncomplaining patience,

was this—that he would go on for another three or four years as he did now; go on until his last ideas of marrying, never very strong, were over, and then, some day, would discover that her companionship had become necessary to him, her faithful slavery a thing he could not do without, and so perhaps take her, without any assumption of love whatever, to be his wife.

Among a certain class of women—good women, *au fond*, mind, they must be,—this sort of long-suffering, spaniel fidelity is not uncommon, especially for men younger than themselves. Some maternal instinct, that has never seen the light, may be in its composition, and explain upon how scant a return such attachments thrive. If Mrs. Hamilton in her widowed life had possessed a child, I think she must have reproached Henry Bryanstone sometimes; but having none, she just took him, faults and all, as mothers do, and made an idol of him. All indifference, all caprice, all absolute unkindness, all but his marriage! she felt, in her inmost soul, that she could pardon him until seventy times seven.

But whatever her own secret hopes, her acquaintance generally were very far from sharing them. “And I think Laura has a great deal too much sense to mislead herself,” Mrs. Letty, her most intimate friend, would kindly say. “She and I are so fond of each other, that it’s very natural my brother should have got to like her; but to think that Henry, *Henry* should ever dream of marrying a woman of her age, and a widow, too! and he can’t bear widows. I’m sure dear Laura is far too sensible ever to entertain such an idea for a moment.”

And with every imaginable variation, and clothed with every shade of scandal, from the most delicate suspicion to the broadest, unequivocal assertion, this opinion of Mrs. Fairfax went the round of all Laura Hamilton’s female friends. Men had so long ceased to connect the thought of marriage with Henry Bryanstone, that they spoke of his intimacy with Laura just as they would have done if her husband had been still alive. She amused him, nothing more. Men, as a rule, are much less surprised at the power of a clever woman, no longer young or pretty, than women are themselves. For men know—as no woman ever can realize—how utterly powerless youth and beauty, unsupported by ability, are to enslave them for more than a month at a time.

And so the intimacy had lasted through all these years with every covert aid and abetment from that profound little speculator on her own worldly interest, Mrs. Fairfax. As much as it was in Letty to love, she loved her brother. She was proud, that is to say, of his ability, of his handsome person, of his fortune, of his prospects. Some years earlier she had looked upon his marriage as a thing to be, and had even wished for it,—with some woman of course possessing rank and money. But as time wore on and Henry Bryanstone grew gradually to care more for the club and lansquenets, for Newmarket and Ascot, than for young ladies; as gradually his name began to be looked upon as scratched by the great heads of the matrimonial market, it was borne in upon Mrs. Fairfax to see how great an advantage her own children would derive from Henry's remaining unmarried.

His large fortune, inherited conjointly with herself from their mother, was absolutely at his own disposal, and her children were the only nieces and nephews he had. For one of the boys—Dick, poor lamb!—he had the strongest affection; indeed, when the little fellow's arms were round his neck, was wont quite seriously to speak of him as his heir. Richard Fairfax at such times would open his blue eyes and say: "Well, I like that. A boy of two-and-thirty, not my own age, talking about his sister's child being his heir." But Letty, who was never led into a joke on so sacred a subject as money, would only say, affectionately, she thought Henry likely to live until not only Dick, but baby, too, were old, old, old men. In her heart she thought,—gradually of course; intense selfishness, like everything else, must have a growth,—“now that Henry has remained single so long, most likely 'tis for his own happiness he should continue so. Such a woman as he could love is not the woman he would ever marry. Everything is for the best.”

And under the influence of these optimist views; knowing, too, how great a safeguard against marriage is a house beside whose hearth a man may smoke a cigar unchidden; she encouraged his intimacy with Laura Hamilton as aforesaid. Under no other circumstances would she have allowed the world to speak of Laura as her own bosom friend; for Letty was not only religious, but exclusive; and Laura—well, Laura Hamilton's set was certainly *not* exclusive, and mustered twenty men at least, to every woman on its list. But

maternal ambition will do much. Letty would have visited people much nearer the outside than Laura Hamilton, to secure an inheritance for Dicky. "And it saves Henry from worse," she would say, when inflicting domestic sermons upon her husband. "It's vile and wicked of you, Richard, to go about with Henry in the way you do, just as if there were no difference between a bachelor and a married man. But for him, poor fellow! I make every excuse. Laura Hamilton is far from what I admire, both in herself and her friends, but I know very well she helps to keep poor Henry straight, and I am thankful to her."

Between Bryanstone and Richard Fairfax there existed a rare thing to see between men so closely connected—friendship. They had gone bird's-nesting together as little lads, for their fathers' estates lay side by side in Warwickshire; had fought each other at Harrow; had gone together through an Indian campaign, during the short two or three years in which both were in the army. To look at the two men, you would have pronounced them as opposite as any human creatures could be; but they suited—does not that word, and no other, sum up all we know of love and friendship? And the circumstance of Richard Fairfax, by order of both families, leading Miss Bryanstone to the altar, had neither at the time nor since abated one jot from the affection which bound him to his friend.

Possibly if Richard had loved, or pretended to himself that he loved, Letitia, he would have liked his brother less. No young married man very devoted to his wife could well have fulfilled the part of Damon to such a Pythias as Henry Bryanstone. But Richard's orders had been to marry, not love, Miss Bryanstone the heiress, and he had held scrupulously to the bargain. He treated her very kindly; went with her three or four times a year to church; yawned through her grand dinner parties; called her, and really thought her, an excellent little woman, and doated on his children. For the rest, Henry and he just went on with their old lives very much as if no Letty existed to make them brothers. One of the amusements of Bryanstone's life, the passion of Richard's, was the turf. Bryanstone sometimes made a good thing of it, and sometimes a bad one; and once or twice in disgust had thrown up his stud for a year or two, and gone abroad, or gone in for other things.

But Richard's profession was horse-racing. His innocent-looking-face and wide-open blue eyes were as well known as the face of John Scott himself on every race-course in England. He gave up his money, his time, his abilities,—such as they were,—his heart, his soul, to horse-racing, and made it answer; just as the investment of money, pluck, and industry would have answered had he chosen to devote them to any other trade.

In the early years of their marriage, Letty, believing horse-racing to be ruinous, had made Richard's life miserable by her denunciation of it as immoral. As time wore on, and her husband's exchequer continued to be replenished, she got gradually more accustomed to what she figuratively termed her "Cross;" indeed would go so far as to accompany him sometimes to Ascot and Epsom—with a bundle of tracts under the seat of the carriage for surreptitious distribution on the road—and enjoy herself immensely. The fact was, in her inmost heart she had grown rather to favour Richard's predilection for the turf than not. Putting money aside, which Letty never did or could do, his horse-racing kept him, as Laura Hamilton did Henry, from worse associates. Besides, were not the Duke of B——, the Marquis of C——, and Lord D——, all great turf-men, too? If a duke, a marquis, and a lord had been seen walking arm-in-arm on the high road to Hades, Letty would not have been quite sure that there wasn't a good deal to be said about the breadth of causeway and excellence of pavement along that well-frequented road.

"A third-rate French actress!" repeated Bryanstone, in answer to Laura Hamilton's last speech. "Well, I don't think Miss Forrester looks half as much French as English or German, with her large figure and light hair. Have her down, Letty. Produce the chameleon, and set the matter at rest at once. Richard,"—Richard was asleep again,—“don't you vote we have down the children's new governess?"

"Miss Forrester has already received my directions, Henry," said Letty, stiffly. "As only the Orr girls and the Dixons are coming this evening, I thought I would let her appear and play or sing, whichever she can. And I do beg you and Richard wont be unsettling her, either of you. If you do, it's the first and last time she shall be put in the way of temptation."



"Unsettling her!" cried Richard, innocently. "Good heavens! Letty, what a dreadful mind you must have! Did I ever try, did I ever wish to unsettle Miss Bailey? Now, I put it to you candidly."

"Governesses are not made of barley-sugar," said Bryanstone, sententially; "and if they were, Richard and I are too old for unwholesome sweets. You needn't be afraid, Letty; the young woman wont melt away, and leave you without a governess the moment your husband looks at her. Have her down here for a little to amuse us before we go to the drawing-room. I'm sure we want something enlivening if we're to go through three mortal hours of the Orr girls and the Dixons."

"What, in Dick's own room, Henry? A young person in her position in a smoking-room? Laura, do you think it would be the thing?"

"O, I daresay Miss Forrester has no objection to smoke," said Mrs. Hamilton, demurely. "About propriety, dear Letty, you know you are such a very much better judge than I am in everything."

Mrs. Fairfax paused, considered, recollected a text—I mean a precedent, afforded by some person of title—Lady Anne Somebody used to allow the governess to come and talk German in the smoking-room; and finally despatched a favourable ultimatum upstairs.

Three minutes later Honoria Forrester entered the room.

## CHAPTER V.

## LETTY FALLS IN THE FIRST ROUND.

SHE was dressed in a sweeping black moiré train, with a black velvet body, cut high and square as you see in the old Venetian pictures, relieved by a narrow stand-up frill of lace round the throat, and below the elbow by the wide-falling open sleeves of point lace. Her hair low down, as usual, in a soft misty cloud upon her forehead, with one long negligent tress falling down her neck, and the rest of its golden masses coiled round a jet comb at the back of her little well-shaped head. She wore no gloves, no ornaments, no fripperies of any kind. Only her black moiré, black velvet, point lace, and jet comb—and she looked superb so!

Richard Fairfax and Bryanstone rose instantly before the presence of the "children's new governess;" a surprised flush flashed across Mrs. Hamilton's dark cheek; poor little Letty very nearly screamed. Was this the plain, thick-waisted young woman she had seen arrive in a dingy merino and old straw bonnet, not three hours before? This magnificent, Juno-like woman, with her calm self-possession and marble throat and arms? What—*what* had she taken into the bosom of her family? Would Richard or Henry fall the earliest victim? and how—I will do Letty the justice to say that she thought this even in her first access of pious indignation—how soon, and by what means, should she get her out of the house?

"We have no party, Miss Forrester," and, as she said this, Mrs. Fairfax's eyes scanned, breadth by breadth, every morsel of Honoria Forrester's costly dress, and then informed the wearer, as plainly as eyes could speak, what she thought of it.

"So I was told, Madame," answered Honoria, deferentially. "Had it been otherwise I should have asked you to excuse me from appearing."

And, as she spoke, she passed quietly on to the chair Richard Fairfax offered her by the fire, bowing with perfect ease to him, and also looking up for one second into Henry Bryanstone's eyes as she did so.

Her velvet and moiré had not been put on without profound deliberation. In acting all the scene over, as she made a habit of rehearsing everything, in her bed the night before, she had cast herself for the part of a poor, friendless orphan, weighed down with heavy crape and misery, on her first appearance before Henry Bryanstone at his sister's fireside. But, however finished her plans, Honoria Forrester was always ready to abandon them if any fresh tuition warned her to do so when the time of action came. The moment she breathed the atmosphere of Letty's house; the moment she saw the well-tutored little girls, the decorous women servants with white aprons, the library of theological books upon the dull, dark schoolroom walls, that sixth sense of premonition, for which we want a name, told her that her stay would be brief indeed. On the plea of wishing to unpack, she went to her own room at once; and she was just kneeling beside one of her cases, wistfully looking at that very black moiré, and wondering if in this house it would ever see the light, when Mrs. Fairfax's request that she would come down to the drawing-room that evening, reached her.

"I shall be happy to do as Mrs. Fairfax wishes," was her answer; "that is, if it is not to be a large party."

"O, no party at all, miss," answered the under-housemaid. "Mr. Bryanstone dines here, and Mrs. Hamilton, and I think I heard Watson say one or two ladies in the evening."

"Thank you. Say to Mrs. Fairfax I shall wait upon her at the hour she mentions."

And then it was that the intention of plunging into the thick of the fight at once—of donning, so to speak, her war-paint from the very outset, flashed upon Honoria's brain. The campaign *must* be short: live in this house! teach these children out of these books! why, a fortnight must see the whole farce out. She was playing to lose. As well let her adversary see her cards as soon as they were dealt. If Letty was, by irresistible evidence, to be brought to consider her an impostor, why strive to propitiate her at all? Mrs. Hamilton, too (Honoria long ago had heard everything about her, and about her intimacy with Bryanstone): would not both women

equally bitterly be sure to hate her? Let them do so from the first. Put on her moiré and her velvet this very night. The men wouldn't know she was over-drest; the men wouldn't know this was not the kind of black in which a well-conducted young woman should mourn her benefactress. The men would only note, as so many men had done before, how well the velvet and point lace and rich silk set off her lithe, full form and Rubens-like skin and hair; and, as you have seen, she put them on.

"Mrs. Hamilton, let me introduce Miss Forrester," said Bryanstone, seeing that Letitia, with her little set teeth and angry brown eyes, did not look at all as though she wanted to make her new dependent at her ease. "Richard, Miss Forrester."

Honorina returned Mrs. Hamilton's cool nod with graceful gravity: at Richard, who straightway felt himself on her side, she smiled; and then she said one of those charming little nothings by which foreigners replace our weather statistics, looking pleasantly at Letty as she spoke.

Amidst the varied injustices of human life, nothing is more striking than the consistency with which people who are in the right have a knack of making themselves appear in the wrong, and *vice versâ*. Letty was as much in the right as is a poor little virtuous hedge-sparrow in her own nest, who flutters up her feathers at that vile, audacious intruder,—the cuckoo,—who has surreptitiously made its way into the bosom of her own innocent flock; and the vile intruder, the unscrupulous adventuress, Honorina Forrester, was horribly, atrociously in the wrong. And yet to Henry Bryanstone's mind, and, worse still, to Richard's, it seemed that both Letty's and Laura Hamilton's manners were those of cold, disagreeable fine ladies, setting themselves up against a poor dependent, simply because she happened to be young and pretty, while Honorina struck them as the very model of what men like most in women—unaffectedness, good-humour, gentleness.

"I hope it's not for me you throw away your cigar, sir?" she remarked, looking furtively up at Richard's admiring eyes, when her little attempt at being friendly with Letty had fallen with dead weight to the ground. "I like the smell of smoking so much."

"So do Letty and Mrs. Hamilton," answered Richard. "Sensible young women, all of you. I threw the end of my

cigar away, Miss Forrester, because I was just going to take another; and I am glad to see that you're not one of those ridiculous women who pretend they can't be shut up in a room with tobacco-smoke. Stuff and nonsense, all of it! It's only their husbands' and brothers' cigars that disagree with them. Any woman living could stand any conceivable amount of tobacco, provided it was her lover, or her friend's lover, she wanted to win, who consumed it."

"Richard!" exclaimed Letty, in a voice and with a look that told him plainly how indecent such a strain of conversation was before a governess, "Richard, pray remember; we are not alone. I perceive," she went on, coming up to time bravely; "I perceive that you are accustomed to the presence of gentlemen smoking, Miss Forrester, from your saying that you like it."

"O dear, yes," answered Honoria, off her guard for once, or so wrapt up, as true artists will be, in her present *rôle*, as to forget some of those she had already played. "I am half foreign, remember, madame; that must be my excuse, if anything I say is contrary to English taste. Monsieur, allow me; you are too far from the fire." And she took a paper match from Richard's hand, lit it, and presented it to him, with a little airy grace that at once brought Mrs. Letty's blood up to boiling heat.

"You may be half foreign by birth, but I don't see how you can have been thrown into men's society during the last eight or nine years at least," she cried, savagely. "Two years you were with Mrs. Forsyth; seven years, you tell me, at a lady's school at Peckham. I should think neither of those were situations in which you would have much to do with the smell of cigars."

The tone of Letty's voice was cruel in the extreme. Honoria looked at her for a moment, as though in silent surprise, then turned her eyes, suffused with tears, to Henry Bryanstone's face.

"I used to sit in my father's room, when he smoked, Mr. Bryanstone, years ago, when I was a little girl in Paris, and once or twice in my holidays I've gone to France, and stayed with old friends, and got into their ways again; that was all I meant to say—indeed it was; and what madame remarks is only too true. My life for many years has, indeed, been one to make me forget all the likes and dislikes of my youth."

Then she stopped short.

Now, Henry Bryanstone was about the last man in Europe to mistake acting, however good, for reality. He had not at all a high opinion of Miss Forrester; was doubtful of her antecedents, her history, and everything else about her; knew as well as she knew herself that she was posing for innocence at this very moment; also that his sister was a good little honest, upright Pharisee, who had done what she considered to be her duty from the time she could run alone until now. But it is an instinct with most men,—with him it was a specially strong one,—to take part, irrespective of right, upon the weaker side. Whatever else Honoria Forrester might be, she was, for the moment, a dependent sitting beside his sister's fireside (to which he had been the means of bringing her), with Letty asking her searching questions in a hard voice, and Letty and Laura Hamilton both looking at her as though her very presence was a contamination to them.

"Hang women, and their fancies, and their hypocrisies, and their ways of torturing each other!" thought Mr. Bryanstone in his heart. "I might have known what the fate of any pretty woman would be in Letty's hands; but, as she is here, she shall not be bullied with impunity when I am by, at all events."

And Mr. Bryanstone forthwith began in a low voice to converse with Miss Forrester concerning Paris, Paris life, and her own recollections of both.

("Turning her head from the very commencement, Laura dear," Letty afterwards whispered to Mrs. Hamilton, on their way to the drawing-room; "and she sat as if she had been an empress talking to her prime minister, looking at him through her half-closed lids, and babbling on with her silly French talk. Think what the effect of his attentions must be upon such a creature. *You* know, my dear, how fascinating Henry can be when he chooses!" For they joined issue, for once, in the presence of the common foe.)

"Can they be of the same flesh and blood?" thought Honoria, glancing from Bryanstone's animated face as he talked to her, to Letty's cold, little set mouth, and round, cruel brown eyes. "Yes, the same lines are in both faces; only, for the moment, one is lit up with flattered vanity, the other under the charming influence of silent rage; the same

lines in the features, and, unless I mistake, a good deal of the same relentless hardness in the character. If Bryanstone had been duped, would he look as 'Letty' is looking now, I wonder? It is a speculation worth remembering."

And with one of her searching glances she scrutinised both faces again, dwelling so long upon one object at least of her scrutiny, that Henry Bryanstone, not ordinarily a vain man about his person, could not help feeling that the new governess's handsome eyes were incontestably taking notes of him.

"You must remember what her life has been, shut up with that old woman," he said when Richard chaffed him afterwards. "A gardener is not a gardener seen through the *grille* of a convent." But at the time he did feel flattered, nevertheless. Few men would not have felt flattered with Honoria Forrester's eyes telling him plainly that they thought him worth winning.

It was a language of which Henry Bryanstone had heard a great deal, translated into many tongues, and told with more or less outspokenness during his two-and-thirty years of life. Seven or eight years before, when he was in the zenith of his first popularity among mothers and young ladies, he had been openly called the handsomest man in London. Worn and somewhat prematurely old-looking as he was at present, women in their hearts still considered him one of the most irresistible; though now that he had taken so fearfully to men's society, and had given up going to balls, it was no longer considered thoroughly correct to say so.

He was tall and long-limbed; with a slight stoop about the shoulders, and a want of polish, amounting at times to open carelessness, in his way of walking across the room, holding a door open for old ladies, et cetera. So far not at all a drawing-room Apollo; but Miss Eyre first revealed to us, and we have gone on discovering ever since, that women don't like drawing-room Apollos. His head was a beautiful head. In that alone lay a whole world of unlikeness between him and Letty: the head broad at the temples, upon which the iron-black hair was already thin, high, nobly receding and somewhat obliquely cut towards the back. The same clear-cut line of feature belonged to them both; only while Letty's eyes were mere brown-bead, little common eyes, Bryanstone's were hazel-grey, deep-set and piercing; while Letty's continual smile was hard and unmeaning, Bryanstone's rare one

was full of genial, almost tender sweetness. He was more close-shaven than men generally are now, except parsons or men connected with the turf. No moustache or beard hid a line of his handsome mouth or square-cut blue-black chin. And this circumstance, together with his great aversion to lavender kid gloves, dainty boots, and other amenities of civilization, was one of the small "crosses" of Letty's life.

In matters of dress she could generally subjugate Richard; but Bryanstone was not to be altered from his own peculiar taste. "And it's shameful of you, Henry," Mrs. Fairfax would say when some of her best people, her cousin Lady Lemmington perhaps, or a great dignitary of the Church, had come in unexpectedly and found Bryanstone in a shooting-jacket and coloured shirt at four o'clock in the afternoon; "with your fortune and your position, to dress as you do! I declare I'd sooner see you plain in face and exquisitely drest, than handsome as you are, and drest like a Newmarket trainer. If you'd only wear your whiskers long, it would be something. As it is, you're no style at all, not even bad style. It's disgraceful before the servants."

But nothing, as I said, changed Bryanstone. "If a man is lavish of cold water and clean linen, it's enough," he would answer. "I don't go in for being a swell. Whenever I have to approach women of an evening I put on, as you know, a butler's suit, silk stockings, and a pair of gloves. In the day I am free, and wear whatever boots, hats, or coats I choose."

Even in the butler's suit—the most hideous clothing yet hit upon by our species—Mr. Bryanstone was handsomer than nine hundred and ninety-nine out of every thousand men you meet. Honoria's eyes told no untruth. She really did think as she looked at him now, with the red fire-light shining on his face, that he was the handsomest man she had ever seen in her life, despite the family likeness to Letitia. She would have staked for him as boldly, have played her game out as unshrinkingly, had he been sandy-haired and foolish-eyed like Richard. It was not in her to love, either with the heart or with the brain. She was simply bereft of that faculty, as a blind man of sight, or a gaudy passion-flower of odour. But the nearest approach to human affection which she did possess, insatiate personal vanity, was stimulated by the thought of conquering this man with whom so many women



*must* already have failed. And unknown to herself, unacted for once, her voice did soften, her eyes did sink as she sat beside him.

The conversation, of course, was by way of general; but you know how two women like Letty and Laura Hamilton, without positive rudeness, can crush another alien woman into silence!

"Yes, Paris is the one place in the world to live in," remarked Honoria, humbly, in answer to some speech of Bryanstone's; "above all for rich people. You have been there, I suppose, Madame?" to Letitia.

"O—yes," the "yes" intoned. "Laura, dear, do you know the Windermers have come back? I met them yesterday, and Matilda is *so* gone off, and not at all improved by the ridiculous French way she drags her hair down on her forehead. Shall you call?"

"You ought to go to Paris oftener, Letty," remarked Bryanstone, when Laura had answered and thrown her little stone—a mere pebble, but which grazed nevertheless. "It would do you good, rub off some of your rust of English prejudices. Richard and I are sure to go over and see the Grand Prix run for in May. Suppose you come too. Miss Forrester could tell you where to get the best bonnets, and Lilian and Polly would be in raptures."

"I should like it very much," said Letty, amiably. She generally closed with any of Henry's offers of taking her about, even to wicked dissipated races; for he had a habit on such occasions of insisting upon paying all expenses, besides making her and her children presents. "Wouldn't it be nice, Laura; you could come too? I long so much to hear dear M. Coquerel at the Protestant chapel again."

"But Lilian and Polly shall go, too," persisted Bryanstone. "I should like above everything to have the children in Paris."

"You think of them too much, Henry," answered Letitia, "but that is a question impossible to decide now. In my present—ahem! unsettled domestic arrangements such a thing could not even be talked of."

"Unsettled domestic arrangements?" cried Richard. "What does that mean, Letty? Are we to have another change of servants, or what? I'm sure I should think the present batch were starched enough to please you. If it was not for Tontin,

I do believe the odour of sanctity about my own servants would stifle me. The women are bad enough, but Watson's Pecksniffian face makes me inclined to use vile oaths every time I look at it. Tontin alone leavens the whole mass. Tontin is my French valet, Miss Forrester, the most awful little disbelieving reprobate you can imagine. He has lived with me, in spite of Mrs. Fairfax, for three years, and is studying English now for the sole purpose of converting the whole of the female servants to Atheism." Honoria laughed (mentally how she held out her hand to Tontin! how she liked, how she respected Tontin!)

Mrs. Fairfax rose, with an angry rustle of her dove-coloured silk dress. "It is time for us to go, Laura dear, I think,—*quite* time!" with a flash of her eyes at Richard.

She took her friend's arm; and the two women marched away out of the room, leaving Honoria to follow as she chose. Was it to be expected that Mrs. Fairfax should step aside politely and request the children's new governess to precede her? Certainly not. But I cannot say I wonder that the new governess should turn back when she reached the door and look wistfully at the faces of Mrs. Fairfax's husband and brother, as though imploring them not to leave her long to the tender mercies of her mistress!

As Letitia conducted Mrs. Hamilton upstairs at once, to look at dear baby asleep, and talk over the enormities of the black moiré, Honoria was spared the ordeal of being alone with her new friends. She had, however, to bear the side-long looks of the families of Orr and Dixon, who, in great numbers, and in flowing white tarlatanes, were ushered into the drawing-room before Mrs. Fairfax had returned. Shortly afterwards the men, reinforced by one or two others, joined them; and Miss Forrester had no longer anything to fear. Regardless of the Miss Orrs' artless charms and the Miss Dixons' syren voices—they stood in a row, drest alike, with downcast eyes, and warbled that lengthy ballad commencing—

"Mermaids we be,  
Under the blue sea,"

or something to that effect—regardless of these blandishments Bryanstone remained firmly by Honoria's side, and not all Letty's manœuvres, not all the looks of Laura Hamilton's

dark eyes, could get him away from her during the remainder of the evening.

Miss Forrester was amusing: the first, essential quality that Bryanstone required now in a woman. She demanded none of the usual young-lady talk from him. She posed so admirably that it gave him pleasure to be able to think he forgot she was posing. And besides, he knew the measure of the Orrs and of the Dixons so thoroughly! Their measure and their matrimonial intentions, too: and what was the use of him, Henry Bryanstone, talking to young women whose sole view of life was marriage, and who made no secret of their principles? If Miss Forrester had such intentions, she did not molest you with them: and this in itself was a great merit. In short——

"In short she understands you, Henry," said Laura Hamilton, as he was putting her into her carriage at Letty's door. "Take care of yourself. With time and opportunity that woman could do with you just as she chose."

Her voice was not devoid of a certain unusual tremor as she spoke.

"Could she?" answered Bryanstone, with one of his quiet laughs. "I think, Mrs. Hamilton, this is the most foolish speech I ever heard you make. Miss Forrester is a very nice person, as far as physique goes, and she's new, and Letty bullies her. Besides, I had only the alternative of her or the whole galaxy of Orrs and Dixons. For the rest, she's about as dangerous for me as—well as any of the other young ladies who are good enough ever to talk to me! Good night," holding her hand kindly in his; "I'm coming to dine with you to-morrow, if you'll let me. Gresham asked me, and I said I was engaged to you. What should I do, Laura, if I had not your house always ready to stand between one and being bored?"

But Mrs. Hamilton drove away with a colder shadow over her heart than any flirtation of Bryanstone's had ever cast there before. She was not jealous, like Letty, of Honoria's beauty; she was not offended by Bryanstone's tacitly ignoring her when he said he had only the choice of Honoria Forrester or of the Orrs and Dixons. Was she not accustomed patiently to be ignored by him? What she felt was rather an intangible dread, a superstitious shadow, such as old wives say men feel when a chance step crosses their grave. A quivering, a

terror of the flesh, not unlike what a mother might be supposed to feel at the stealthy, unseen approach of some deadly reptile to the child she loves. For women, being perhaps less humanized than men, retain many of those simply animal instincts still. And somehow instinct seldomer makes mistakes than pure reason in this kind of matter.

The guests all departed without Miss Forrester being able to steal away from the room; and then, Richard having wisely followed Bryanstone to the club, she found herself *tête-à-tête* with Letitia.

Mrs. Fairfax's little face was set hard. She possessed, as she was wont to boast of herself, heaps of moral courage in "breaking things" to people, and had no intention of letting a night's rest cool down her wrath.

"You do not play on the piano, then, Miss Forrester?—may I trouble you to attend to me?" Honoria was examining the embroidered letters on her handkerchief. "You do *not* play on the piano, after all?"

Honoria looked at her quietly, full between the eyes; and Mrs. Fairfax with all her courage, drew back a step. That look was, morally, what an unexpected blow, straight from the shoulder, is to a man who has been bullying another, and thinking him a coward.

"I do play, Mrs. Fairfax; you mistake."

She had scrupulously called her "Madame" hitherto. Letty marked the difference, and knew that the gloves were off in earnest.

"May I ask why you would not play when I requested you to do so, then?"

"I have not touched the piano for weeks: I could not have played to-night before strangers."

"O—in-deed! Whatever the effect upon your own feelings, it would have looked much better before my friends if you had played, than kept as you did to Mr. Bryanstone's side the entire evening. I speak out, Miss Forrester, as I consider it right to you to do. Your manners, your—your—whole appearance this evening are not what I can approve."

"My manners! my appearance!" Honoria opened her eyes haughtily; then turned and looked at herself in one of the mirrors, as though to find out in what particular point she was obnoxious.

"Yes, your manner, your appearance. When you lived with Mrs. Forsyth it may have been different. I know nothing about that. You seem entirely to forget what you are now, Miss Forrester, and the position you hold in my house."

"Pardon me, Madame!" her temper was admirable; "I have forgotten neither. I am a gentlewoman, and I have come here, by your request, to be the teacher and companion of your daughters."

The tears rose into Letitia's eyes; they always did when she felt herself getting beaten. "Don't talk to me in that sort of way, Miss Forrester, if you please. I am not strong, and I can't bear it." She had never had an hour's illness since she was born. "I'm sure I never was so upset in my life—so different to poor Miss Bailey; and you spoke so much about your domestic tastes and everything—and point-lace and moiré are *not* mourning!" concluded Letty, illogically, but with great animus.

The point-lace and moiré were the real drops that had made the cup to overflow.

"I did not know that you wished me to appear in mourning," said Honoria, quietly. "I have heard that in some houses the dependents are not allowed to obtrude their private bereavements, and for that reason I put on other black. To-morrow I shall gladly return to my crape and merino; and also, if you will permit me, to the retirement of the school-room. Your painful remarks have shown me, Madame, the position in which you wish me to stand; and as long as I remain under your roof you will not, I trust, have to remind me of what I am again. Mr. Bryanstone had the kindness to notice me, and I confess I remembered only that he was a gentleman, I a lady, and forgot all the other inequalities between us. It shall be for the last time, Mrs. Fairfax. Good night!"

And having delivered herself of this oration, Miss Forrester, like an impersonation of injured virtue, walked with a firm step from the room, leaving Letty in tears, and more thoroughly beaten than she had ever confessed herself to be in her life before, by her own fireside.

On the landing of the second floor Miss Forrester encountered M. Tontin, on his way from his master's dressing-room; and as they passed each other the eyes of the new *governess* and of the French valet met.

"Sacristi!" exclaimed Tontin, mentally, as he stood and watched her go upstairs; "where have I seen you before? Face, figure, hair, eyes, I know them as well as my own image in the glass!"

During his watch for his master's return that night, M. Tontin ransacked his brain in vain to recall where, and at what time of his sufficiently-varied life, this young woman's face had been familiar to him. That he had seen and known her he would have sworn, and this for the present was all. Whether in Saint Petersburg, Vienna, Paris, or Brest (circumstances had taken Tontin to Brest for some years), he knew not.

But Honoria Forrester never forgot a face, or the name that belonged to it. She had recognised, she remembered M. Tontin well.

## CHAPTER VI.

## RUBIES OR PEARLS?

IN the course of Richard Fairfax's toilette next morning, the valet revealed his suspicions.

"O, of course, Tontin," said Richard, "of course you know her. You, who know more than you ought of every pretty woman in Europe! Only keep your mysterious recollections to yourself, mind. The young person's position in the household wouldn't be improved by any remarks that you are likely to make upon her."

"Monsieur!" exclaimed Tontin, with effusion, "I have never betrayed a woman yet. Although I have not the happiness to know who my father and mother were, something says to me, 'Tontin, you don't come of a race who commit petty *lâchetés*.' A crime, if you will, but nothing small or dirty: and to betray a woman is of the smallest, the dirtiest! Their calling is to betray us—don't let us interfere with them."

Tontin was the household refreshment of Richard's life. He was privileged to say anything, either to his master or his master's friends; but, with the tact common to his countrymen, never passed the fine line that divides freedom from familiarity. Richard was wont to say of him that he was the greatest rogue unhung; and I really believe he was an extraordinary little blackguard (though, if you come to speak of unhung rogues, the subject is so large that to use superlatives in favour of one poor obscure French valet seems invidious). By Tontin's own account of himself, he had never any particular chance of being anything but a blackguard. A boy who used to kick him with wooden shoes; an old woman whose plan was to strip him, and set him out in the cold, when he had not begged sous enough during the day,—these were Tontin's earliest and sole recollections of

domestic life. One day, when by inductive processes he concluded he must have been somewhere about eleven years of age, the old woman ended her days beside a pan of charcoal, and was carried to the Morgue, where Tontin went to weep over her.

"I was a child, you see, and what will you have? I *had* called the old she-cat mamma!"

From this time forth he was enrolled in the great army of Paris gamins, with no particular lodgment or way of living, for more than four years. At the end of that time a hair-dresser took a fancy to his sharp face, and received him without wages into his shop.

"This man had genius," Tontin would say; "he must have had genius, or he would not have chosen me. By the time I was seventeen I was worth more to him than his foreman. Cutting, shaving, wig-making, hair-dressing,—everything came the same to me. I was the benefactor of that man and his whole family: I say it to this day."

"And the next little episode?" Richard would ask, when Tontin was narrating his memoirs. "That accident that took you to Brest for so many years, you know, Tontin?"

Tontin at this point invariably looked grave, as a virtuous man recounting his misfortunes might well be supposed to look; then he would put his ugly little head on one side and generalize. The curse of mankind, the bane of civilization, had ever been, he averred, the unequal distribution of property. "Car, voyez vous, Messieurs, j'ai beaucoup étudié, moi. I know what is the history of our race. From my earliest days, before I could read at all, I was impressed with the monstrous injustice of the non-labouring classes being the wealthiest!" And so, finding himself in a position where his views could be reduced to practice, he, Tontin, used his humble endeavours to re-adjust the immemorial curse; in other words, broke open his employer's till, and absconded with its contents.

"I had laboured with that man for years, Messieurs; through me he had risen from a little shop in the Quartier Latin to a splendid establishment in the Passage Choiseul; through me his name had become great, his children were put forth in the world, and what was my reward? 'Tontin, good boy,' he would say, 'thou hast cause to bless the day I saw thee. But for me thou wouldst be on the streets still, more



likely still at the galleys. Some day, Tontin, some day, I shall see thee yet at the head of a business like mine."

But the day probably seemed too slow of coming, and, as I have mentioned, Tontin, in an evil hour, carried out into practice his democratic principles, and a thousand or so of francs from his master's bureau at the same time. He was caught on the frontier, and a judge, who had evidently not made the history of our race his study, found Tontin guilty, and sentenced him to his seven years.

"Read M. Hugo if you would know what I was at the expiration of my time, or rather read M. Hugo if you would know what an iniquitous human law tried to make of me! Thanks to my *bon naturel*, Messieurs, I came out from the ordeal much as I entered it—much as I have the honour of standing before you now. There are some natures out of which the pressure of a corrupt and artificial society can never wholly crush all the good. Mine is one of them."

If all this had been acting, Tontin would have been weary-some; but he really believed in his own *bon naturel* as much as he did in his boundless conquests over the other sex. On the latter subject he was indeed inexhaustible, clothing his narratives always with that language of mysterious reticence which true men of honour affect when recounting their own successes, and not unfrequently giving you to believe that he had been forced gently to repulse some of his crowds of worshippers. At the time he entered Richard's service he called himself thirty-nine, but looked fifty at least (he had been living all over Europe, in all imaginable capacities, since the Brest injustice); and in addition to having lost his first youth, was of that inconceivable hideousness to which only a hideous Frenchman can attain.

"Un beauté de Vulcan," he would say of himself, glancing complacently across Richard's shoulder at his own wizened monkey-face and grizzled bullet-shaped head in the glass. "Mais que voulez-vous? Les femmes aiment ça. C'est appétissant!"

That every woman-servant in the household flew before him as she would have flown from the incarnation of evil, was nothing to M. Tontin. "Monsieur," he would say, when Richard gravely questioned him as to this seeming contradiction, "I discourage them. I'm not a religious man, not a moral man, but I have my own ideas of honour. The females

in Madame's employment are sacred to me as my own sisters would be. *Allez!*"

Although the well-known richness of Tontin's imagination in regard of women made Richard attach slight importance to his communications respecting Honoria Forrester, he did repeat it to Bryanstone the next time that her name chanced to be mentioned.

"O, of course Tontin knows all about her," said Bryanstone carelessly. "I should like to see the woman he doesn't know all about. Do you remember that day in Paris when he came into the room weeping over a bunch of flowers because it was the anniversary of *her* birthday? 'her' being one of the prettiest actresses in the world, and a friend of our own into the bargain. By Jove, though, Richard!" he interrupted himself suddenly, and in a very different and in a much more excited tone, "have you heard the last news? 'Tis said, after all, that Buccaneer is not to go for the Two Thousand. Roger came up to give me some of his 'valuable private information' about it this morning, but I'm not at all sure of Master Roger, and haven't been for some time past. What the deuce does it matter to him whether we're sold or not?"

So do men pass unheeded the first creak that might have told them the bridge was broken over which they should walk to their doom. What had Henry Bryanstone to do with Honoria Forrester's antecedents? Was not the scratching of Buccaneer for The Guineas of very much more vital importance to him than the reputation of all the yellow-haired, white-armed young women in the world?

Meanwhile, though Tontin was silenced and Bryanstone apathetic, Miss Forrester had to hold her own as best she might against the combined forces of Letty, Letty's children, and Laura Hamilton; no contemptible alliance. Lilian and Polly, young women of nine and eleven respectively, being by no means Letty's weakest auxiliaries on the occasion.

"I wish you to be very kind to Miss Forrester," she told her children, on the morrow of her own first defeat. "But you know, Lilian, what dear Miss Bailey's system was with you, and I expect you to report to me if Miss Forrester's is the same. Say nothing of the course of studies you have been pursuing, and tell me exactly the plan your new governess lays down for you."

And the trap was a well set one; and Lilian and Polly

were quite able to fill the little parts intrusted to them; only, unfortunately, Miss Forrester happened to foresee it, and so was forearmed. On the first day after her arrival, the day on which lessons were to commence, Honoria came down an hour before the children were up, and carefully examined the books.

"All I want is to stay under her roof a fortnight," she thought. "Indeed, with such a shifty card as Bryanstone, the sooner I bring everything to a crash the better. All I want is not to show utter incompetence—to have some faint idea what the children of such a woman as 'Letty' should learn at ten years old!"

She looked over the pile of books, geography, French, Scripture-history, grammar, and Heaven knows how many other branches of learning besides; and by dint of patient examination of pencil-marks on the margins, deduced for herself the approximate length of lesson into which Bailey had been accustomed to divide them. The next question was, did they learn a division out of each of these dozens of arid books every day?

"I must take my chance of that," Honoria decided. "Tell them I can lay down no rule until I have tested their powers of memory. They shall begin with something solid to-day; the names of the Hebrew kings, now (whoever these old gentlemen may be,—they can't mean, I suppose, the patriarchs of the Mont de Piété?), and the longest sums I can write on their slates. In the music I shall be right; and by constantly speaking French and hurrying 'em straight from one book to another I daresay we shall progress delightfully."

They progressed so well that when the studies were over Polly rushed off to her mamma to say that the new governess was a much, much greater Tartar than old Bailey, and never seemed to think they had done enough. But Miss Lilian, with two years more knowledge of the world, tossed up her pretty face and said, that for her part she didn't believe Miss Forrester knew anything about teaching at all.

"And as to Scripture-history, mamma, she lost her place and couldn't find it; and while she was turning the book about I said Jehoshaphat was the man who put his head on Delilah's knees, and she never set me right; and when we were doing geography and Polly said the King of Dahomey lived in Mesopotamia, she had to turn over the leaf to see before she cor-

rected her. And that's true, mamma, and she doesn't like us or want us to get on. You see if I am right."

But though the children, with children's unfailing intuition, could tell that Miss Forrester was not, and never would be, their friend; and though Miss Lilian daily amassed a heap of illustrative anecdotes like the foregoing ones, the new governess so unflinchingly held to her post beside the school-room table, that Letty, in her heart, felt it was impossible to find open fault with her as to her duties. She was punctual to a moment in her hours; daily walked with the children in the Square; spoke French unremittingly; went through the music-lessons with a patience and exactitude beyond anything Miss Bailey had ever shown.

"And still, Laura dear," cried Letty, in the fullness of her heart, "still I know, as well as if an angel from heaven had told it to me, that there's something wrong. The woman's acting a part, and getting a footing in the house, and I feel I've no power to turn her out. And what I like least of all is, Henry never mentions her name when he comes. That's always his way when he's thinking of anything in earnest (don't you recollect the time that you and I thought he'd forgotten Matty Brabazon?), and only this morning Dicky informed me Uncle Henry met them as they were coming from the square, 'and Mademoiselle told us we might take one more round with our hoops,' said my poor innocent, 'and while we ran Mademoiselle waited by the gate and talked to Uncle Henry.' O, if I only knew how to get her out of the house quietly! Money itself wouldn't stop me!" And to do Letty justice, she could give no stronger proof of her sincerity than when she invoked the name of her god.

Laura Hamilton and Mrs. Fairfax had seen each other daily ever since the fatal advent of Honoria Forrester. At the present moment the young women were taking their five o'clock tea, and talking over her iniquities together, beside Mrs. Fairfax's dressing-room fire. One of the staple miseries of Richard's existence, a grand dinner-party at home, was to take place this evening; and while Letty poured forth her indignation against the lady in *moiré* who had inveigled herself under a pious roof like her own, her eyes could not but rest complacently on the delicious mauve one, ready outstretched upon a couch, in which she herself would entertain two bishops, a philanthropic and noble statesman, and several

inferior scions of the nobility at her own table to-night. Mrs. Hamilton was not asked, of course. It was a thing dear Laura quite understood that none but the bishop's own set must be asked to meet him; and Laura submitted to the slight as she would have submitted to any slight whatsoever that had been offered her by a sister of Bryanstone's.

"You're certain you think mauve moiré and emeralds will look well together, Laura? Just hold a bracelet close to the skirt while I look at it from the fire . . . well, I don't know, really . . . perhaps the rubies would be better, eh?" For Mrs. Fairfax was the veriest little Goth in taste; would wear diamonds with white muslin; emeralds with yellow silk; sapphires with black velvet; pearls of a morning. "Perhaps rubies *would* be better?" and she put her head on one side, and looked with evidently favourable eyes at the hideous combination.

"I can't say that I call it correct, Letty, but then you know my taste is so quiet. Now how would your jet set look?"

"Thank you, Laura, dear; my jet set, indeed! Why I was obliged to wear it on account of Uncle Hugh's death the last time the bishop dined here,—not but what I was sincerely sorry for him, poor old man; and he was quite prepared, and left the whole of his plate to Dick—we shall use it for the first time to-day. His lordship would think I live in jet! Dear me, how tiresome everything is! I don't see at all why the rubies shouldn't do. If they look well with white silk, why shouldn't they with mauve moiré? If that woman upstairs wasn't such a wretch, I'd send for her. The French understand these things, and I should hate the bishop's wife to be able to say I was dressed in bad taste. Do you think now there would be anything in just consulting her a minute?"

Mrs. Hamilton thought there would be nothing at all derogatory in such an action for once; and after a great deal of discussion, and successively testing every jewel Letty possessed beside the mauve moiré, Valence, the maid, was summoned and despatched for Miss Forrester.

Laura Hamilton had her own reasons for wishing to see the governess. She, too, had laid her little mine for that young woman's destruction; a quiet mine, of which she had spoken to no one; but which, had the match been properly applied,

was a deadlier one far than any that Letitia unaided could have worked.

Miss Forrester came in, and gave her answer promptly. Rubies with mauve would be execrable. If Madame Fairfax chose, she would look through her jewels and select the parure which to her taste would look the best.

Something—one can't call it magnanimity, perhaps, but something a good deal like to magnanimity; something large-natured, *quand même*, there was in Honoria Forrester's organization. She knew that both these women hated her; that she was walking, probably, into a snare at this moment; that by to-morrow, more likely than not, she would be turned out of the house. Under these circumstances, would some very excellent women have been able to resist the temptation of recommending the most frightful combination of colours conceivable? Honoria Forrester felt no such temptation at all. For the moment she was an artist; would have selected Letty's most becoming trinkets; have stayed and dressed her to the very best that was in her power. She was above this kind of retaliation. Perhaps, having a fixed purpose, good or bad, high or low, is the one thing that saves a woman from small and barren jealousies.

"Pearls; of course pearls go best with mauve," cried Letty, when Miss Forrester had so decided. "I wonder, Laura, you couldn't have thought of them when you looked over the case."

"And, if Madame would allow me to say so, some addition of white lace to the skirt—mauve never looks very bright at night—a robing brought up at the side, so, of point-lace, if possible, and terminating in a little knot of marabout feathers, thus. It could be arranged in a quarter of an hour."

The lace was produced; and, assisted by Valence, Miss Forrester transformed the heavy English-looking dress into an elegant Parisian one. Letty's heart quite smote her as she looked on, to reflect that Miss Forrester was not a young woman of strict principles. If she could only be convinced that Henry meant nothing serious, she really was not sure she mightn't keep her yet. A lady's-maid at half Valence's wages would do, with taste and ability like this to superintend.

"Pearls for the neck and arms," remarked Honoria, as

she stood, her work ended, waiting for her dismissal; "and a lappet of white lace in the hair to match the trimming on the skirt. I hope Madame thinks her toilette well-arranged."

Letitia answered that it was so; not without the additional warmth of manner that a woman who is to shine before bishops must sustain towards the machine, animate or inanimate, that has assisted her to shine. And then Mrs. Hamilton felt that the moment had arrived for her to fire her little train.

"I saw Miss Richardson yesterday, Miss Forrester," she remarked, without the slightest note of warning whatsoever. "She talked of you a good deal."

Now, if she had said Miss Fortesque, or Miss Allayne, or Miss Spearpoint, Honoria Forrester might then and there have betrayed herself. But, as it was, the very commonness of the name gave her time to think.

"Miss Richardson," she repeated, and horribly thick though her heart beat, her face gave no sign. "I know four Miss Richardsons at least. Which of them do you mean?"

"I mean your next door neighbour at Peckham. The lady whose house stood on the right hand, as you entered, of Miss Jarvis's."

A house, like a person, once seen was photographed upon Honoria Forrester's brain for ever. In a moment, while Mrs. Hamilton spoke, the whole picture and environment of the Miss Jarvis's house rose before her, as she had seen it *once* in the indistinct twilight of a cloudy autumn day. An old-fashioned red-brick house, with trim gravel court in front, a small shrubbery on the right, as you entered, and close on the left, another and similar red-brick house.

"There was no house on the right as you entered Miss Jarvis's;" and the enormous advantage of proving her adversary at fault gave her voice thorough steadfastness. "You must be thinking of some one else, I imagine."

Mrs. Hamilton thought over her words again, and the blood rose into her cheeks as she remembered that she was mistaken. "I—I mean on the left," she cried; "of course, on the left. Miss Richardson, who lived on the left, was talking to me about you, Miss Forrester."

"Ah! What did Miss Richardson, who lived on the left, find to say of me, I wonder?"

If the words were not an impertinence, the tone was. Mrs. Hamilton's temper rose.

"She spoke of your habitual depression, of the way in which, for seven years, she used to watch you pace up and down one short terrace in the garden, until she fancied the grass grew worn with your steps. She spoke also of your ill health. Also of your appearance;" emphasised.

"Ah! It pleased her, I hope?"

"There was no question of pleasing or not pleasing, Miss Forrester. You must have been a very different-looking person in those days to what you are now."

"I was so. I was over-pressed with work, badly dressed, wanting air and exercise, and in miserable health. Are there any other details concerning me, and me alone, that you seek to know, Mrs. Hamilton?"

"I seek nothing," answered Laura, coldly. "I know as much as I wish to do."

"That is fortunate. I excessively dislike being forced to speak about myself."

For a minute the two women looked steadily into each other's eyes: then Honoria turned away quietly; made one or two indifferent observations about the arrangement of the dress to Letty; and glided away, with her stealthy step, from the room. But her limbs felt heavy under her, as she made her way upstairs again to her own.

"Tontin here!" she thought, "and this woman suspecting and tracking me! But for the blindest chance I must have betrayed myself. How shall I stand day after day, week after week, of such an ordeal? As well bring it to a crisis at once—this very night, if I can. The difficulty will be how to court discovery, how to make yon little fool leave her bishops and her lords and come upon us! It must be left to chance."

"Us" meant herself and Bryanstone. He had told her that morning he should steal away to the smoking-room after dinner, while Richard entertained the bishops over their wine. And Miss Forrester had not positively refused to meet him there.



## CHAPTER VII.

## A CHARMING PICTURE AFTER WATTEAU.

THE dinner was the greatest success Letty had ever had. A bishop on her right, a viscount on her left, another (colonial) bishop and several honourables lower down, a new accession of family plate on the sideboard, her husband and brother both conducting themselves with the strictest propriety, and talking Sunday-school talk to the bishops' wives, who would rather have had anything else, at the further end of the table.

Yes, but that the human heart is insatiate, and that Letty, being human, felt that archbishops and dukes were things still to be desired, this hour and a half of pompous eating and drinking would really have been her *beau-idéal* of enjoyment, —the ideal that some of us think is to be found in love, and some in present glory, and some in future fame. Was Letty so very much more mistaken than the rest of us? The puppets who peopled her Paradise at least were real; her plate solid metal; her bishops good meat-consuming heavy-weighting men of flesh and blood; and that is a great deal more than can be said of the visions that people the ideal world of wiser men.

When dessert was over, the wit and intellect alike of the lords temporal and spiritual fast lapsing into silence, Letty smiled meaningly at the bishop's wife number one, and the bishop's wife number one smiled at her; and then the colonial lady was glanced at (but with a tempered friendship, fit for a bishop's wife who was only colonial), and then the women rose, and Richard and Bryanstone were left to the ponderous occupation of entertaining the two churchmen, the philanthropic statesman, and a few imbecile young men whom Letty had picked up for the night, as women who go in for intellect will pick up stray writers or painters; simply on the grounds of their being nephews or grandsons to great people, and so conducive to the general high tone of the party.

Earlier in his marriage, Richard Fairfax, on the occasion of his wife's entertainments, had been wont to conceive, in the innocence of his heart, that because men were serious men, bishops or otherwise by profession, their after-dinner talk would be of a character to match their calling; and dreary and futile were the attempts the poor young fellow had made at different times in asking questions concerning Patagonian missions, tract societies, and the like. Broader experience, however, had taught him that the drinking of claret and hock is an employment wherein most men meet on common ground. Given, good wine, and the withdrawal of the women, and bishops, philanthropic statesmen, turfites, and imbecile honourables, all enjoy themselves very much in the same way; and if you will only let them alone, with very little outlay of trouble or speech upon the part of the host.

It was Richard's habit to go to sleep after dinner; he did so now, the men having drawn their chairs round to the fire: mentally, at all events, whether he shut his bodily eyes or not. The philanthropic statesman began to converse with one of the imbecile men on the last turf scandal; the bishop number one received the confidences of another imbecile man as to his late success in potting African lions; his colonial lordship planted two colossal feet on the fender, and imbibed his claret in peaceful animal enjoyment, without talking to anybody; and Henry Bryanstone, after a few minutes, stole away unseen from the dining-room.

Meanwhile, Letty, upstairs, had much harder work to do with the bishops' wives than had her husband with the bishops themselves. For whereas men only act before women, women act not only before men, but before each other. No standing at ease: no hour of claret-drinking with feet upon the fender; no honest discussion of the subject nearest their hearts, for them. The first bishop's wife was a great, white, obtuse woman, with a strong profile and a velvet gown, and who displayed extreme chilliness of manner towards her colonial sister; a short, little, abrupt, sandy woman, who had had eleven (living) children, and liked to talk with great fulness of details over her experience. And the only other woman present was the Lady Cassandra Peto, a withered branch of the peerage, whom Letty invited to all her parties, as she invited the imbecile men, because her name was written in

the book, and who never opened her lips except to eat or yawn, during the whole entertainment.

What was to be done with such materials? When the colonial woman talked, the woman in velvet shut her eyes; and when the woman in velvet talked, the colonial woman turned round and began to give anecdotes, about babies to Lady Cassandra, who, naturally hating babies and everything belonging to them, stared impertinently away into the fire, as though the subject was too disgusting a one to demand an answer.

"And I wish you were all dead!" thought little Mrs. Fairfax, as she smiled at them and chattered at them. "What do bishops marry for, I wonder? That wretch in velvet, or the other beast with her babies;" mind, this is *verbatim* what Letty thought; "and you, you hideous old yawning, supercilious Cassandra, I don't know which is the worst. But never mind, I go through it cheerfully. You can't any of you say that my dress, and my rooms, and my dinner, and everything about me, isn't perfect, you old cats!"

And then she fell, for the third time, to admiring the diamonds of the bishop's wife number one.

This kind of thing lasted through the time-honoured hour and a quarter of torture so well known to British matrons; then, one by one, the men re-appeared, and Letty was free again. Wine had so far thawed the brain—let me be guarded—speech of one of the imbecile men, the lion potter, as to enable him to sink on the nearest sofa, and into a monosyllabic flirtation with Lady Cassandra. Richard, with the desperation of a man going to the dentist, charged at the bishop's wife in velvet, and kept to her; the other imbecile man fell an easy prey to the minor bishopess. "Howid brute!" he explained afterwards, "told me the way she dragged her litter of eleven—do you call 'em litters, though? I forget—thwough the bush, or acwoss the desert, or somewhere." And Letty was free to receive the attention of her bishops and her statesman to her heart's content.

She was so engrossed as totally to forget Bryanstone's absence. She danced hither and thither among her illustrious guests. She talked of earls and marchionesses, art and literature, Professor Jowett and the last conversion to popery in high life, all in a breath. Her heart told her that she was now indeed reaching the crowning point of her ambition; was

becoming the leader of a set; "one" in the exclusive ranks of London exclusivism. Richard's want of tone, and her brother's indifference to fashion, had been barriers against her progress hitherto; but to-night was, she felt, the inauguration of a series of unclouded successes. She had had "deans a many" at her table before; but never, save once, a bishop. And here were two, and a philanthropic statesman who *never* dined except in a certain set, and not another creature in the room lower than an honourable. What a party to talk over with poor dear Laura to-morrow! What a party for that spiteful Cassandra to repeat to those horrid Lonsdales (after their impertinence, too, in presuming to leave her out of their last concert, making the insulting apology when they saw her next, that their rooms "were unfortunately not large enough for them to ask everybody")! What a delicious list of names to flourish forth in the *Morning Post* of to-morrow, as the select party who had the honour of dining with Mr. and Mrs. Richard Fairfax last night at their residence in Chester Square.

Eleven o'clock came, and the carriage of number one bishop was announced. Mrs. Fairfax was descanting to him just then upon Art, of which she knew nothing, and going into raptures over every celebrated name that his lordship mentioned.

"Poussin?—O, yes; Richard has got a charming little picture after Poussin. All court ladies and gentlemen, you know, sitting about under the trees, in a lovely park."

The bishop thought the subject unusual for Poussin. Could Mrs. Fairfax be thinking of Watteau?

"O, Watteau, of course," cried Letty. "I knew it was something of the kind. Is Watteau indeed one of your favourites? Then you must see this picture; that is if you don't mind coming into Richard's den. He is so fond of the picture, that he will have it hung where he can look at it as he sits and smokes his horrid cigars."

The bishop would be delighted to accompany Mrs. Fairfax to see the charming picture after Watteau, and the bishop's wife in black velvet would go too, and then the colonial people and the statesman joined; for men and women after a dinner-party are only too glad of any excuse to get upon their legs; and finally, the remoter scions of the aristocracy, male and female, brought up the procession.

Now, only that Honoria was too wicked a woman to have her prayers answered, it really might seem as if the ardent aspirations she had been sending up during the last hour were bearing fruit. She longed for an *esclandre*—an *esclandre* public, impossible to gainsay; and lo! Letty herself was bringing it about for her. Letty was bringing a host of her own best people to bear witness to the scene that it was Honoria's dearest wish should be discovered.

"I don't know whether there's a light," cried Mrs. Fairfax, tripping downstairs before them. Richard's den was a small room, built out about half way down the stairs; "if there is not, 'I'll have the gas lit in a moment. Pictures look so lovely by gaslight. This way, please.'"

And the bishop at her side, and with all the other people close behind, she pushed open the door of Richard's room.

"O, there is a light. Come in everybody. The picture is—is—is——"

The words died on Letty's lips; her flushed cheeks turned to ice. Outstretched before the fire, a pipe in his mouth, was Bryanstone; kneeling between him and the hearth, her handsome face upturned and close to his, her hands familiarly clasped upon the arm of his chair, Honoria Forrester.

No situation could be more compromising; no situation more impossible to explain away. She, Letitia, had conducted two bishops and their wives, a severe statesman, *et omnes*, into her husband's smoking-room, and there, at eleven o'clock at night, was her own brother, making love, outrageously, to the governess of her children!

[Let me state, in justice to Miss Forrester's character, that Bryanstone was doing nothing of the kind. He was talking to her simply in the kind of half-flattering, half-cynical strain he always talked in to women—barring young ladies—and if Miss Forrester chose to kneel down on the hearth-rug instead of remaining in her place, he certainly was not responsible for the action. Probably she wanted to warm her hands, or show him how well she looked in the devotional or prostrate attitude, and with upturned eyelashes. Henry Bryanstone was not a man to trouble himself much on such a matter; he really had seen a great number of pretty persons on their knees in the course of his life, and was not at all in danger even with Miss Forrester's white hand upon the arm of his chair.]

As soon as they had all entered, Honoria got up, and stood

silently looking into the faces, one after another, of the whole party. Both the bishops thought they had never seen such a handsome young woman before in their lives. Bryanstone rose too, and laid his pipe down on the mantelpiece.

"You should have warned me, Letty," he began; but his voice was not thoroughly natural. "I had no idea you—"

"That is the picture," Letty interrupted, addressing the bishop, and turning her back, dead, upon her brother and his companion. "I don't know whether there is light enough for you to see it well."

His lordship examined it, of course, and talked of the admirable grouping, and middle distance, and transparent shadows, and excellent half-lights; but still his lordship's eyes wandered to the living picture, the magnificently handsome woman, who stood, silent and composed, by Mr. Bryanstone's side.

As to the rest of the company, all of them well-bred people, it is not too much to say that they stared as though they would never be sated by staring at Miss Forrester. The bishop's wife in velvet awoke thoroughly, for the first time since dinner, in her delight at being a near eye-witness of such a shameful and disgusting scandal—shameful scandals come so seldom near bishops' wives! The sharp little colonial woman actually bristled, like a terrier who scents a rat, with interest. The imbecile men put up their glasses at Honoria, and tried to look feeble inuendoes at each other. But the conduct of the Lady Cassandra Peto was more wounding to Letitia than all.

This aristocratic and maiden bosom had long cherished malignant feelings both to Bryanstone and to Letty; to Bryanstone for obstinately and consistently refusing to receive her attentions; to Letty for having once beguiled away a prebend whom Lady Cassandra had looked upon as her own. Now was the moment of retaliation. Cassandra Peto did not stare at the disgraceful young woman or at Henry Bryanstone. She simply walked straight up to Mrs. Fairfax, held out her hand, and said these words:

"Good night, Mrs. Fairfax: it is time for me to go."

But the tone said, as plain as any words could have done: "It is time for me, or for any decent woman, to leave such scenes of horror as these." And every one of the company understood, as well as Letty did, what was meant.

Such an example is always contagious. In any crowd, in any unexpected emergency, it needs but for one human being, wise or foolish, to act, and every other human being there will feel it a sort of duty to follow him. It became clear at once to the bishops' wives that it was time for them to go: that Lady Cassandra was a discerning person, and that Mrs. Fairfax's house was not the kind of house it ought to be. The bishops thought nothing at all; but they followed their wives, and the rest of the men followed them. There was a simultaneous pressing of hands, a simultaneous wishing of good night—in tones more or less constrained or absolutely cold—and in another five minutes the whole of the guests had left the house, and Mrs. Fairfax, her husband, Henry Bryanstone, and Honoria Forrester stood alone in the smoking-room.

Then Letty closed the door, and walked up bravely to Bryanstone. Her face was livid; her small features actually drawn and set with rage.

"Because I'm your sister, Henry, I suppose you think you can insult me as you choose."

Her voice was quiet and slow. Bryanstone had heard it like that once or twice before—once when she was quite a little girl and he had upset an inkstand over her new pink silk dress—and knew that it was a sign of a demon rising.

"I'm awfully sorry, Letty,—on my word I am; but how could I have an idea you'd bring those people here? There's not a bit of harm done, after all. Bishops don't faint at tobacco-smoke any more than other men. You brought your guests into Dick's smoking-room, and they found me smoking a pipe there before the fire. Voilà."

"I brought my guests into Richard's smoking-room," broke out Letty, vehemently; "I brought people of the highest position and principles into my husband's room to see a picture, and I found—what? At eleven o'clock at night you, my own brother, carrying on a shameless intrigue with my children's governess. I say nothing to you, Henry. You have no religion, you pretend to none, and this is only of a piece with all the rest of your atheistical, godless life. But you, madam," and she turned, with her brown eyes ablaze, to Miss Forrester, "I desire to leave my house at once. Yes, this minute. What do I care where you have to go to?" for Honoria had stammered out something about having no friends. "You can go out upon the pavement at least. A

much fitter place for you than the house of an honest woman."

There was a dead silence for a moment; then Bryanstone spoke. His face had suddenly grown like Letty's—the same set lips, the same evil fire in the eyes.

"You'd better mind what you're about, Letitia. Take my advice, now, mind what you're saying. You'll repent this some day."

But Letty's passion, for once, had got the better of her prudence. She had been disgraced before two bishops, before a viscount, before that vile Cassandra Peto! If Bryanstone had threatened then and there to disinherit Dicky, she would have braved him just the same.

"I think perfectly of what I do, Henry, and I will take the consequence of my act. That woman shall leave my house to-night, and you may get shelter for her or not as you choose. Go!" addressing Honoria. "I give you half an hour to pack up your clothes."

But now another voice struck in. Richard Fairfax knew Bryanstone's face well. He knew how implacable that easy nature could be when roused; knew that to take Miss Forrester under his protection, marry her, perhaps to-morrow, was just the kind of madness into which Letty's blind injustice might goad him. And besides this, Richard Fairfax would not have had a scullery-maid turned out of his house at midnight. If Miss Forrester had made love to both bishops at once, or stolen the family diamonds, or offered to elope with the viscount, or indeed committed any act of atrocity whatsoever, Richard would none the less have felt it his place to protect her from insult as long as she remained under the shelter of his roof.

"You're an absurd little woman, Letty; you always were and always will be. There's no harm done at all, that I know of, and it was all your own fault dragging those starched old buffers out of their proper place. Lord, I could die now when I think of Cassandra Peto's face!" And Richard opened his great blue eyes innocently, and then went off into one of his peculiar fits of silent laughter.

Letitia ignored him and his speech alike. She ignored him so habitually in small things, as to forget sometimes, when emergency came, of what kind of stuff Richard Fairfax was made.



"You will leave my house at once, Miss Forrester. If you choose it, I will order a cab to be called for you." And she stretched her hand out towards the bell.

Bryanstone caught hold of her arm with a grasp of steel. "Before you call the servants to witness this lovely scene, Letty, I advise you again to pause. Miss Forrester is no more to me than any other lady. She came into the room, found me smoking, stopped by my request to talk to me, and for this simple cause you have offered her the deadliest insult one woman can offer to another. If you go one more step, I make her cause mine. Now, do as you like."

And then he unloosed her arm, took up his pipe from the mantelpiece, and made a pretence of re-arranging its half-consumed contents. But his hand trembled visibly; Richard and Honoria both noted that it did so.

"I am not afraid of you, Henry," cried out Letty, with the pluck of a little wild cat. "I am afraid of no one when I am doing what I know to be right. She shall leave my house to-night."

"Then, by God, she sha'n't leave mine!" exclaimed Richard—"("I wish you were at the bottom of the sea," thought Honoria; "with your stupid English honour and rubbish you'll spoil everything yet!")" "You seem to forget, Letty, that I've something to say in the matter. Whatever you choose to do in the morning you may. I don't interfere with your right to do what you like then, and I have no doubt your justice will be tempered with mercy. In the mean time Miss Forrester shall not leave my house—no, Miss Forrester, not even if you wished it yourself, you shouldn't. You may mount guard over her, if you like, Letty. Henry and I'll go out for the night, and even Watson, too, if you prefer having no men in the house; and you can summon all your women, each with a good book in her hand, and let 'em sit round in a ring and exorcise her. But Miss Forrester shall stay. I have spoken."

The tone of his bantering voice cooled Bryanstone wonderfully. Honoria saw that in an instant, and bestowed another internal benison on Richard.

"And I, at least, shall go off at once, Letty," he remarked. "I don't offer to shake hands with you in your present frame of mind; but I think to-morrow you'll thank Richard and me for having given you a practical sermon on Christian duty."

Good night, Miss Forrester : I regret more than I can say, that any act of mine should have led you into a such a ridiculous position. I shall see you in the morning."

He took her hand, and Honoria felt that his still trembled, and was cold. Did rage alone cause it to be so ? she wondered.

"Good night, Mr. Bryanstone; and thank you for saying a kind word to me : I need it. Thank you, too, Mr. Fairfax, for not letting me be turned out of your doors at such an hour as this."

Then she turned away abruptly, with a sob, and left them all before Letitia, vanquished again, could get out another word.

Richard went down with his brother-in-law to the front door. "Sweet creatures women are in their vigilance over each other's virtue," he remarked, as Bryanstone stood silently lighting his cigar outside. "If we hadn't been there, Letty would have turned her into the streets without compunction. So much for handsome governesses. You don't mind being up early to-morrow, do you ? I must be off to Newmarket by the first train."

"Well, I don't think I'm going," said Bryanstone, slowly. "I've been too seedy for the last week to venture standing about in this horrible damp weather ; and, besides, I've business in town. What's the good of my going ?" He added, in answer to the horrified expression of Richard's face ; who would as soon have missed his chance of salvation as he would have missed seeing the race for the Two Thousand. "You'll settle that affair with Townly for me just as well as I could myself ; and, as I told you to-night, you may put as much money for me as you can get on the Wizard. The horse can run round the lot of them. Good night, old fellow ! You managed Letty like a brick. Upon my word, if it hadn't been for you, I don't know what act of idiocy I might not have committed."

He shook Richard's hand with his usual hearty grasp, jumped into the hansom that stood waiting for him, and gave the driver this address : Bruton-street, One-hundred-and-one.

Richard Fairfax went up to bear the brunt of his wife's temper with his mind at rest. He had old-fashioned, simple notions as to the efficacy of one nail in driving out another ; and had no more fears as to Bryanstone's safety ; for Bruton Street, One-hundred-and-one, was Laura Hamilton's house.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## MRS. HAMILTON DOES VIOLENCE TO HER PRINCIPLES.

HER small double drawing-rooms were furnished in the perfection of artistic taste. Women said everything about poor Laura's establishment reminded them more of a bachelor's house than of a lady's presence,—the drawing-rooms especially. The men habitués of the house found those two little rooms the pleasantest of any they knew to rest and smoke and escape from boredom, and be happy in. No useless work-tables, flower-baskets, foot-stools, or any other conventional drawing-room abominations covered the floor; card tables put away in recesses, served for the occasional requirements of loo or lansquenet: the rest of the furniture consisted solely of low divans, ottomans, and every description of easy-chair that it has entered into the heart of man to conceive. Three or four good pictures, one of them an original by Velasquez, were on the walls; on a Venetian console between the windows, the only work of supererogation in the room, stood an exquisite copy in marble of Gibson's Venus. Books, that looked as if they had been read, stood on carved-oak shelves on each side of the fireplace; a dog or two lay, generally, outstretched upon the hearth-rug; and the hangings of the room were in crimson velvet, cunningly relieved with white! *That* decided her friends, more than anything else, that dear Laura's rooms were unlady-like.

"With her dark skin, poor thing! no doubt crimson velvet was becoming; but who ever saw it in a drawing-room? Oil pictures, and that dreadful piece of statuary between the windows, were bad enough; but crimson velvet! It was easy to see whose taste had been consulted in the choice of such upholstery."

These rooms, whatever their faults or merits, were, as you

may suppose, familiar and favourite ones to Henry Bryanstone. They struck him with a welcome sense of peace now when, entering, redolent from the heavy dinner-party and fierce after-piece at Letty's, he found Mrs. Hamilton quietly at work, her favourite dog Marcus, a setter he had given her, at full length before the fire, with one paw outstretched upon his mistress's dress, and his sleepy brown eyes lazily winking up at her face.

It was one of Bryanstone's weaknesses to like seeing women at their needle. Was the picture any less pleasant to him because Mrs. Hamilton had hastily hid away her novel and seized her work when she heard his cab stop before the door? Of course not. Men are never so much really taken as by *tableaux de genre* arranged expressly for their pleasure. Only that man is happiest who has an experienced artist, not a diffident beginner, to design for him.

She put up her hands, work and all, with a little gesture of surprise.

"O, Mr. Bryanstone, fancy seeing you now!" It required no very great stretch of imagination: twelve o'clock was not at all an extraordinary hour for one of Bryanstone's visits. "You don't mean to say that Letty's bishops have gone away already?"

"Hang Letty's bishops!" was Bryanstone's answer. "Hang the bishops, and the governess, and the whole lot of them! I'm bored and out of temper, Mrs. Hamilton, and that's why I've come to see you. Set me to rights, please."

He passed her without offering to shake hands; drew a chair, but not his favourite one, abruptly up to the fire; and let Marcus thrust a wistful, fawning face against his hand unanswered. Mrs. Hamilton noticed each of these signs of abstraction, and went on placidly with her work. She understood him as only a woman who loves can ever understand a man. For her to have asked him another question would have irritated Bryanstone horribly. He wanted peace, silence, absolute attention, if he should choose to give her his confidence—nothing more.

"I suppose I may smoke?" he asked, after two or three minutes' silence: "or has dear Lady Somebody been telling you again that it makes her faint only to go near the dreadful contamination of the window curtains?"

"I shouldn't care very much if she had," said Mrs. Hamil-

ton, looking up with a quiet smile. "Yes, Mr. Bryanstone, you may smoke. Get your meerschaum ready at once, please, and I will give you a light."

And she rose, went up to the hearth, and, taking a spill from the mantelpiece, stood ready to light it for him.

She was not pretty—she was not young; but in all Mrs. Hamilton's smallest actions there was something indescribably gentle and subdued, something that made nearly all men for a constancy prefer her society to that of the women they were in love with. "*Elle était plus femme que les autres femmes.*" To one woman belongs beauty, to another wit, to another grace. It seemed her prescriptive right that men should come to her when all the rest of the world was going wrong with them, and be healed merely by the contact of her kindly hand, by the sound of her quiet voice, oftenest of all by her silence. Bryanstone had felt this subtle charm of hers often, never stronger than he did at this moment, as she stood patiently waiting until it should be his pleasure to light his meerschaum, and let her return to her work.

"I never treat you as I do other women, Laura," he remarked, at last; and, as he threw the match back to the grate, he took her hand and held it, but for a minute only; "and I'll prove it now by asking you to do something very disagreeable for me. What do you think has happened?"

Mrs. Hamilton could not tell. She returned at once to her place, took up her scissors, and went on placidly cutting out her embroidery. "Something to do with horses?" she suggested with a little short laugh, for in her heart she was strangely nervous concerning this coming confidence. Bryanstone had said, "Hang the bishops, and the governess, too!" He ought not to have cared enough for the governess even to wish her hanged.

"Horses! If it was only that, you would not see me out of temper, I think. No; it's nothing to do with horses—it's Letty. Letty got in one of her tantrums with the governess to-night—the new, light-haired young woman—and dragged me into it: that's all."

"The governess appeared at the dinner-party, then?" asked Mrs. Hamilton; but she laid her work down now, and looked full into Henry Bryanstone's face. "Why, I was with Letty just before dinner, and Miss Forrester helped her about her dress. They were friendly enough then."

"O, no, no!" answered Bryanstone, promptly. "The fact is, I got away to Richard's smoking-room after dinner, and the governess came in to look for one of the children's samplers, I suppose, and stopped a little while; and then, what should Letty do but marshal the whole of the party, the bishops and their wives, and old Cassandra Peto and all, straight into the smoking-room? I believe they came to see one of the pictures. What they found was—Miss Forrester and myself! You may imagine the rest of the scene."

Mrs. Hamilton was silent for some seconds, then she spoke thus:

"And Letty is going to turn the woman out of the house, I suppose? If she does, she acts right. I would do so myself. Miss Forrester is not a proper person to be there, and you know it."

"I?"

"Yes, Mr. Bryanstone, you know perfectly well, in your heart, what kind of woman Honoria Forrester is. You are not finding it out for the first time now. You know very well you had begun to run after her even while she was in Mrs. Forsyth's service."

"I know that you are all deucedly down upon her!" cried Bryanstone, hotly, "and I know she has the misfortune to be handsome. For the rest, I neither know nor care one jot about the woman; only as I got her into the house I don't mean to stand by and see Letty grossly unjust to her without interfering. As to running after her while she lived with Mrs. Forsyth, I suppose I saw her in all about six times. Once I got her a box at the Opera,—yes, and took her there; I remember you seeing me do so. On another occasion I believe I walked with her at a show of some kind in the Regent's Park; twice or thrice I dined in her society at Mrs. Forsyth's, and there's the extent of the 'running after.' I didn't know," he added rather bitterly, "that *you* were going to take up any of Letty's puritanical opinions. You have never gone in for that kind of thing hitherto."

The hot blood rose to Mrs. Hamilton's face; her lips began to tremble.

"I am never puritanical," she said; "I never go in for religious hypocrisy of any kind, and you know it, Mr. Bryanstone! If Miss Forrester did not come near any one . . . had no bad intentions towards any friend of mine, I mean . . . .

"I shouldn't trouble my head to think whether she was good or bad."

"And what friend of yours is she coming near?" asked Bryanstone, opening his eyes in unfeigned astonishment. "Towards whom has Miss Forrester these sinister intentions?"

"Towards you."

"Me!" He jumped up; stood for a minute or two with his back to the fire, and then burst into a laugh. A laugh whose thorough heartiness might have swept away any suspicions, save those of a jealous woman. "May I ask what her intentions are, Laura?—I beg your pardon for calling you by your Christian name, but you know I always do it when you say anything very ridiculous—felonious or honourable? do they tend towards my plate-chest or my affections—or both?"

"Both," said Mrs. Hamilton, sententiously. "Honoraria Forrester intends to become your wife."

Now, if Henry Bryanstone had heard that Miss Forrester had intentions upon the crown of England, the imputation would not have seemed to him more simply preposterous than did this. Just as a man who has kept out of debt for several years might feel a sheriff's officer's hand upon his shoulder without recognising the meaning of the grasp, Henry Bryanstone had kept out of matrimony until he had literally no matrimonial instincts—I mean no natural terrors in regard to young ladies, left about him. Miss Forrester was a very pretty woman, and she had been flirting with him: had presented him with a bunch of violets in Chester Square that very morning; had met him by appointment in the smoking-room; had knelt with her supple white hands artistically clasped upon the arm of his chair. What next? Well, Letty had treated her in the usual way women treat each other, and he had come to the rescue; possibly, if Richard hadn't interfered, and Letty had turned the girl out into the street, might, in his rage, have committed some egregious act of folly that he would have repented of afterwards. And out of materials such as these Mrs. Hamilton's brain has chosen to evolve—marriage!

He put down his meerschaum and came over to her kindly. In his soul no man ever likes a woman less for her entertaining foolish jealous fears of him.

"And you think I'm in danger?" he asked, bringing a chair beside hers. "You think, at my age, thirty-three next

November, Miss Forrester's yellow hair and white arms will be too much for me?"

"I think," said Mrs. Hamilton, "as I said before, that Honoria Forrester means to marry you."

"And you think me in danger?"

"How can I tell? She is a handsome woman, and you are at least receiving her attentions. What took her into Richard Fairfax's smoking-room at all?"

"To look for one of the children's books."

"It was a sampler just now. Tell the truth, Mr. Bryanstone. She met you there by appointment?"

"And supposing she did, which I am very far from allowing, what of it? and what worth is all your long knowledge of me," he went on more seriously, "if you can even suspect me of falling into such folly? If I had been going to marry, I should have married long ago. But I am not—as I think I have told you some few scores of times since I knew you first."

"Most men say the same," remarked Mrs. Hamilton, making a pretence of taking up her work again; "and most men who say it end by falling into the first palpably open scheme that is laid for them. Why shouldn't you? You are vain. You are indolent. You have an immense opinion of your own strength. All qualities to strengthen the power of a woman like Honoria Forrester over you."

"Speak plainly, Laura. Am I a fool?"

"Well—no—I don't think you are."

"Then, please don't talk to me any longer on the subject of my matrimonial dangers. A man of my age and of my pursuits who would surrender his liberties is a fool, unless of course he believes his love for the woman he marries will be sufficient to make up to him for the loss of his old life. This, you see, never can be my case. As much of that kind of thing as it's in me to feel I expended when I was a youngster. Very likely it wasn't the real thing (that novelists write about, I mean); but I thought it was, and, at all events, it was all I could feel, and I've never had any return of it since. With the solitary exception of yourself—and you are a good comrade, you rank among my men friends—I have never known any woman, since that first one, of whom I wouldn't be sick in three weeks. Of Miss Forrester I should have quite enough in three days. She wouldn't even amuse me if I lived under



the same roof with her. So much for marriage. Now for a different subject, and for common sense. Through my instrumentality the young woman was taken into Letty's house; through my fault Letty is going to turn her out of doors to-morrow morning. I can't look on quietly and not interfere, and if I do interfere I shall get into a scrape. And I don't want to be in a scrape. I want to lead a peaceful life, go over to Paris by and by with you and Letty and the children, and be off for grouse shooting in Norway with Dick and Lauderdale in the autumn. Help me out of it, Laura! It was to ask you to do so that I came here now."

Her embroidery swam mistily before Laura's eyes. Never had Bryanstone's manner been kinder to her than at this moment; never had he been more cruelly explicit as to the nature of their friendship. A good comrade, ranked among his men friends. Well, better have him so than not at all. Better be his friend, his comrade, than one of those women whose beauty could win him for three weeks, or three days; and yet—and yet Laura Hamilton was a very woman, with all a woman's vanity, with all a woman's jealous craving to be loved, not liked. She forced her tears back; long habit had taught her this accomplishment when she was with Bryanstone, and answered calmly that she would do anything he wished. Go to the house; intercede with Letty; see Miss Forrester; try to get another place for her—anything.

Her voice was husky as she spoke, but Bryanstone never noticed it. He really was quite interested about Honoria, and felt it a sort of point of honour that her character, such as it was, should receive no injury at his sister's hands.

"As to interceding with Letty, it's no earthly use, Laura. She would not listen if both her bishops asked her to behave justly to Miss Forrester. The thing is, to provide the girl, half-foreigner and friendless as she is, with a roof to go to. If Letty had turned her out, now, I daresay I should have offered her my little place in Piccadilly." (Laura's heart turned sick.) "I could commit any act of insanity when I'm in a rage, which is about once in seven years; but, fortunately, Richard saved everybody, like the honest fellow that he is; and if you'll be good-natured, I sha'n't have anything more to say in the matter. Just ask her to spend a little time with you, and everything will be right."

Then Laura's work fell in her lap.

"I can't do it," she cried, with a gasp; "no, I can't; it's too much!"

"May I ask why not?"

"Because my instinct says no," she cried, almost passionately,—“because in my heart I believe her to be an adventuress—an impostor. No, I don't talk moralities,” she went on, as Bryanstone was about to speak; “I don't go in, as you reminded me, for piety; you don't need to say that again. I would take in—I have done it already—a miserable, God-forsaken woman from the streets, and shelter her, and try, if I could, to start her again with a better chance in the world. But Miss Forrester—no!”

"Because, I think you said you believed her to be an impostor. Am I right?"

"Because I believe and know her to be one," she answered quickly. "I didn't intend to tell you, but, as you force it from me, you must hear it. Honoria Forrester has not led the life that she pretends to have done. From the first day she came to Letty's, I disbelieved all that story of her being for years in a girls' school; disbelieved it so much, that one day when—when I happened to be at Peckham, I set myself to work to inquire about her. The Miss Jarvises, by an odd chance, had lived next door to the house where my business led me, and I heard just as much as I chose concerning them. The school was broken up, and the Miss Jarvises had left the place, but my informant remembered the French governess who lived with them for years, and described her to me."

"Well?"

"And it was not Honoria Forrester, Mr. Bryanstone; that is all. I was told of a pale, silent young woman in ill-health, and of a melancholy disposition, and who never went outside the school-gates except to church. She spoke with a strong French accent—Miss Forrester does not—and her hair was red, not yellow, not golden. The person who told me this had seen her scores and scores of times, and was not to be altered in her evidence. Now, what do you think?"

"Just as I thought before," said Bryanstone, somewhat obstinately,—“that the girl shall not be turned out of Letty's house without some one”—he laid an ominous emphasis on

the word—"finding her a shelter. If she never lived at this school—if she is an impostor—an orange-girl from Covent Garden—I say the same."

He rose to his feet, and Marcus ran to the door, as though sensible that his old master was going to leave. There was dead silence for some minutes; then Laura Hamilton cried, with a sort of gasp, as if the concession had been hardly wrung from her.

"I believe you are right. Whatever she is, the blow ought not to come from Letty. Yes, I'll ask her, Mr. Bryanstone. I'll go to-morrow morning and bring her away with me, if you think it best."

It was a tremendous victory—a victory not alone over vanity, jealousy, pride, but over something stronger even than this—her instinctive dread of Honoria Forrester being brought near to Bryanstone. She had made many unselfish sacrifices for him at different times, for all of which he had been grateful. No sacrifice had been at all like this one, and he received it as a matter of course; nay, rather as a matter of right—an act of common justice.

"I was sure you would take the common-sense view of the matter," he remarked, presently. "What does it matter whether the girl lived at a school or not? From her general style I should myself be doubtful as to the whole of her antecedents; but what have you and I got to do with her antecedents? To take away the character of a woman in her position is to take away her bread, and we won't let it be done even by Letty. What time will you fetch her? I don't envy you your task of having to face Mrs. Fairfax."

Laura hesitated still. "I suppose it's absolutely necessary to do it to-morrow? You know I have a few people to dinner—you and Major Chamberlayne, and little De Basompierre——"

"And Farnham Lumley," added Bryanstone, quickly. "Yes, I remember; and I think you could not do better than let Miss Forrester make her appearance. Some of these fellows might take a fancy to her for aught you can tell."

"Farnham Lumley," for instance, hazarded Mrs. Hamilton. "He admires that coloured hair." She was sore, bitter at heart, and could not resist the temptation of saying this. A moment afterwards she would have given all she possessed

to recall her words. Bryanstone winced as if he had been stung. His face grew not pale, but livid—awfully, ghastly livid, to his very temples.

"I know nothing of Farnham Lumley's tastes," he said quietly, after a minute's silence; "but if Miss Forrester was a thousand times worse than you and Letty think her, she would be too good for him. Good night, Laura." He took her hand with quite his accustomed gentleness. "I don't think you'd give me the small stabs you do sometimes if you knew how much I think about her—I mean about my poor little sweetheart still."

And then he left her.

"That is the coloured hair Farnham Lumley admires!" the hair of his poor, little, first, dead sweetheart.

The words rang through Bryanstone's heart again and again as his cab drove him to the Carlton.

Little did Mrs. Hamilton know how strong a card she had played that night into her adversary's hand.

## CHAPTER IX.

## DEE DEBENSMAI !

RATHER more than eight years before this, when Henry Bryanstone was still under five-and-twenty, he first saw his "poor little sweetheart," Lady Sarah Eversholt.

It was at a country-village feast, and Lady Sarah, not yet out, and in a plain muslin-frock, was helping the rector's daughters, with whom she was staying, to cut up plum-cake and pour out tea and coffee for the National School children. Bryanstone fell wildly in love with her on the spot. She was a tall, delicate-featured girl of seventeen, with great, frightened-looking hazel eyes, a colourless, shell-like skin, and short pale hair, clustering, like a boy's, about her little graceful head. There was more of sweetness than of intellect on the low soft forehead, and the retreating form of mouth and chin was one which, in women even more than in men, never fails to indicate a character at once affectionate and unstable, confiding, unreliable, cowardly. The most fatal type of all for producing misery to all other stronger natures with whom it may come in contact. But Bryanstone saw, either then or afterwards, no flaw upon his idol. He had just returned, badly wounded, from India; his right arm was in a sling still; his handsome, bronzed face, thin and worn from the effects of his recent wounds. And before the day was over Lady Sarah Eversholt's girlish fancy was won.

Then began that idyl without an end, so trite to all others except the two who for the time are believing the eternal falsehood to be truth !

Bryanstone's place was about five miles from the rectory, and every day during the next four weeks he spent, on some pretext or another, with Lady Sarah. It was June, and her mother—a pretty woman of six-and-thirty—was only too glad, for many reasons, to have her eldest, but not introduced,

daughter safe away from her side during the perils of the London season. It was June; and among the silent clover-fields, with Bryanstone's arm to lean upon, and the music of Bryanstone's wooing voice in her ear, Sarah Eversholt's heart was awakening into as much passion as her childish nature was capable of. Not a very profound one perhaps, if we do right in gauging the emotional by the mental capacities, which is not certain; but deep enough to last out, and to embitter, all her own short life.

From without there was nothing to check or hinder the first chapter of the romance. The rector's daughters, who knew nothing of the family intentions respecting Lady Sarah, took it for granted that Bryanstone, young, well-born and rich, would be considered a fitting match for their friend; and Sarah, led away first by his handsome face, and afterwards too much in love and too much afraid to speak, never gave him the faintest hint of her hand being already promised. Only when she parted from him, to go back to her father's house in Leicestershire, that poor little hand lay strangely cold and trembling in his, and a wistful, piteous entreaty was in the tone with which she begged him to let their engagement remain a secret; begged him not to write to her parents or to her until she had tried to bring her mother round to listen to his suit.

After a week's torturing suspense a letter from Leicestershire reached Bryanstone; a letter not directed in the unformed school-girl hand he knew and loved. It was from the Marchioness of Eversholt: a delicate, well-expressed composition, thanking Mr. Bryanstone for the high compliment he had paid them, and informing him that her daughter had been engaged for nearly two years to Mr. Farnham Lumley. Lady Sarah's extreme youth and shyness must be her excuse if she had in the slightest degree concealed the true state of the case from Mr. Bryanstone.

Engaged to another man—this girl in whose eyes was the very incarnation of truth! whose lips, as he believed, had given him their first childish kisses, their first stammering words of love!

He gave himself one day to think. [To this hour he remembers every trivial detail of that day well; remembers how he watched the changing mosaic of sunshine on his study carpet, as he paced restlessly up and down all through the

never-ending summer afternoon; how he listened, hour after hour, to the chimes from the distant minster; how he talked patiently to his steward about some improvement on his land; yes, even to the precise trees that he desired should fall—he remembers all!] The next morning by the earliest train he started for M——, Lord Eversholt's place in Leicestershire.

The Marquis was not at home; and Lady Eversholt would receive him. She was more than courteous; she was almost affectionate in her attempts at lightening his disappointment. Was not Bryanstone a man of good fortune, both present and prospective, and had she not four younger daughters, none of them as pretty as Sarah, to dispose of? But he was not, even at four-and-twenty, a man to be influenced by soft words. In vain the astute woman of the world pleaded her daughter's youth as her excuse for having encouraged his attentions; in vain she recounted the various obligations under which she stood of becoming Farnham Lumley's wife. Political connexions, family ties, the Marquis's word of honour, dearest Sarah's extreme inexperience. All explanation fell with the same dull lack of interest upon Bryanstone's ear. At the end of an hour, and when Lady Eversholt had in the best manner said everything that the best breeding or policy (the same thing) could dictate, he made this solitary request—to receive his dismissal from Lady Sarah's lips.

"It is due to me," he said, simply. And Lady Eversholt, touched by his handsome face, and not wishing to lose him altogether, knowing too that, with ductile material like Sarah, the game must be to the strong, consented.

It was an interview of half an hour, an interview in Lord Eversholt's library, but as solitary as any they had ever had in the fading night amidst the clover fields. Need I enter upon its details? The passionate protestations from a woman too weak to hold to them; the silent bitterness of a man too strong to utter much complaint. The scene has been enacted until its very name is trite! Before they parted, Sarah Eversholt, with a sob, fell upon Bryanstone's breast, and swore that she would never marry another man than him; and Bryanstone in his heart—but loving her as much as ever—knew that the promise, like all the old ones, would be good just as long as he was there to hold her in his arms.

He received two or three loving, entreating letters from

her afterwards; then suddenly, through quite an indifferent source, he learnt that Farnham Lumley was staying at M——, and that this marriage was to take place immediately.

When it came to this, he felt that he must see her once more; he believed in the report of the marriage thoroughly, mind, and wrote openly to ask this of her. "Not even alone," he wrote; "in the presence of her mother, if she would. But he must see her—say good-bye to her for ever."

The answer was quite a genuine one. Lady Eversholt never even knew of it, he found out afterwards; and it was all blotted and erased with Sarah's tears. She would see him—she would see him—and he must save her yet! The marriage could not be. Bryanstone must save her, if it was at the very altar, from the horrible guilt of marrying Farnham Lumley. She would see him on a certain day, at a certain hour, in her father's house as before, and she was his till death, Sarah Eversholt.

He went to M—— on the appointed day, and at the appointed hour; and as he drove along the avenue to the house caught sight of the ghost of Sarah Eversholt's face, as it whirled past him, in a travelling barouche at Farnham Lumley's side. She had been married to him by special licence that same forenoon.

Had she indeed meant, as she had written, that Bryanstone should be in time to save her at the altar? or, feebly false to him as she had already been to Lumley, was this last, supreme betrayal intentional, a device to keep him on to the very last, and at the same time spare herself from having to confess her own frailty? Bryanstone never asked himself a question respecting her. She was gone—the driver of the carriage pulled up as they passed the bridal pair, and volunteered information of the wedding. Gone!—in the possession of Farnham Lumley! And he was a fool, idly staring after the lost face of the woman who had jilted him.

He turned back to the station at once; came up to London that evening, and during the few remaining weeks of the season lived at the kind of pace very young men do take when they want to live down their own capacity for suffering. At five-and-thirty a man must be a fool indeed who should spend his money or risk his health for any woman's falsehood. Youngsters throw away both; just as a child in his passion throws away good meat and bread and butter because



it is not the sugary indigestible lump of cake he coveted to possess.

And for a man of four-and-twenty the process—set up by nature—is not without wholesome curative results. On the morning of Sarah Eversholt's marriage Bryanstone was a boy, with a boy's fresh hopes; a boy's belief in the truth and goodness of women. When he met Lady Sarah Lumley in town next spring, he was a man of the world; and whatever danger there might be in the renewal of their intimacy, there was no longer any danger of *his* being befooled.

They met; and in a month Lady Sarah's weak heart had fluttered back to its old allegiance. She had never loved Lumley; but she had succumbed passively to being his wife; had really tried, for her own happiness' sake, to put away the image of Henry Bryanstone from her heart. If she had never met him again, possibly she would have got on as well as the majority of other young married women; have taken a lukewarm sort of interest in her house and dress, and visiting list, and partners, and have forgotten, at the end of a year, the better world upon whose portals she once stood, blushing, among the clover-fields, with Bryanstone's arm about her waist, in the hawthorn-scented nights of that dead June. . . But they did meet—do not those people always meet who had better remain apart?—and before a month was over her unstable heart had remembered its old affection, and gone back, as far as in her lay, to its old allegiance.

Too weak in every exigence of life to take upon herself any burden that might be borne by another, Lady Sarah never strove to hide from Bryanstone that she was miserable in her married life. She had borne Lumley's neglect indifferently, at least, hitherto. As soon as her old lover's presence reawakened in her the old sense of being loved, she felt the sting of it bitterly. How different her life would have been with the man who, in spite of her betrayal of him, was still her *slave*! still admired her more than all the prettiest women in London! How exquisitely happy those country meetings of a year ago were! how much better than the glare and fever of this London season! Was it not good to recall them still? Did it not refresh her wearied heart to talk to Bryanstone? Had she not a right to consider him her greatest friend; one to whom she could unburden her troubles, and from whose strong mind she might take counsel? Were the

father and mother who had sold her to Lumley as near to her as him who had first tried to save her, and now had forgiven her her cruel treachery to himself?

Now Bryanstone was no longer boy enough to believe such an intimacy as this could be carried on long without danger to himself. He also rated Lady Sarah Lumley's stability of character at about its due value. But he loved her still; loved her, perhaps, with the obstinacy of a man who, in his inmost heart, knows the unworthiness of his idol; and neither from Farnham Lumley nor from the world did he attempt to cloak his regard for her. However it might all end, he knew already that he would be the greater sufferer; most of all if the weak woman he loved should be thrown upon his protection for life. And still towards this end he walked on, straight and unwavering, just as eighteen months before he had ridden into the ranks of the Sikhs in India; just as when he was a little lad he would walk unbidden up to his father or tutor to receive any promised punishment that he had incurred.

The world looked on and said that Henry Bryanstone was a fool, and that Lumley, tired already of his high-born wife's insipid face, was deliberately shutting his eyes to his own impending dishonour. But the world, as regarded Lumley, was for once wrong. He had wearied of poor Sarah's insipid prettiness before he had been married to her a week; he treated her as it was in his nature to treat any helpless creature, woman, child, or dog, that happened to be in his power. The political reasons for which he had married the Marquis of Eversholt's daughter were no less cogent now than on his wedding-day; nor was Lumley, a man without birth, pushing his way up to power, likely to court the exposure of a domestic scandal. Simply out of ignorance of what she did and where she went, he had not interfered up to a certain point in his wife's growing intimacy with Bryanstone. On the first day that his friends whispered to him what was going on, he took steps of his own to put an end to it. Decisive steps, that attained their object thoroughly.

That night Lady Sarah Lumley went to a great ball given by Bryanstone's old regiment, who were then stationed at Hounslow [he remembers accurately how his poor little sweetheart looked that night, in a pale shining blue dress, and with a single water-lily in her flaxen hair]; and, contrary to his custom, Mr. Lumley attended her. Just because he did so,

Bryanstone made his attentions more open than usual; right or wrong, it was his way to do whatever he did in this kind of desperate fashion; and everybody who saw Farnham Lumley as he stood, white with rage, watching them, knew that a *dénouement* of some sort was approaching fast.

Bryanstone himself believed that Lumley would insult him; and under this belief took care, after handing Lady Sarah to her carriage, to stand for a minute or more with his back directly turned upon her husband, who, livid with suppressed passion, stood waiting to follow her. The impertinence was so obvious, that he almost started with surprise when Lumley immediately afterwards wished him a civil "good night," shook hands with him, and then took his place by his wife's side.

He understood the man's nature better when two days later a blurred note from Lady Sarah summoned him to meet her early in the morning in Kensington Gardens. "It was to be a farewell," she wrote, "for Mr. Lumley was going to take her abroad for an indefinite time." I say, he understood when he saw her why Lumley had not insulted *him*. She was white as death; older by ten years than when he danced with her two nights before in her shining dress and water-lilies; and when she threw back her veil he saw a cruel blue mark darkening all one temple and delicate wax-like cheek.

What he said to her—what projects he formed for her during that last short interview, only Henry Bryanstone knows. A week later a singularly calm happy letter reached him, written from Paris by Lady Sarah. She was very ill; had grown too weak even in these few days to go out. The doctors talked of a great shock she had got, and how the heart's action was impaired, and how rest and nourishment and her own youth would, they hoped, have power to restore the equilibrium in time.

"But I am dying, Henry," she wrote; "dying, and so glad to die! I haven't the right sort of character for life, or for making anybody happy. But it makes me glad to think no woman will ever be as dear to you as I, with all my faults, was once."

Happily for them all, for himself most, her own foreboding proved true. Sarah Lumley died; and in her grave was buried all the remaining youth of Henry Bryanstone's heart. Men found him wonderfully little embittered when, the first shock over, he began to mix with them again. He had not

done with life, or the common interests of life, in the least; only one portion of his nature, his capacity for love, was dead. He made no secret of this. As time went on he fell gradually into the life of other men of his age and position, and the world thought how utterly Lady Sarah was forgotten. But no woman was ever deceived by Henry Bryanstone. To any young girl who showed a preference for him he invariably, and at the outset, announced his intention of not marrying. To women past five-and-twenty he would say, "I admire you—shall continue to do so perhaps for a year, perhaps for a week; but it's not in me to love you or any other woman. Elect for yourself whether you'll have anything to say to me or not."

And they did elect: and, till he tired of such a life, grew more and more prone to men's society and less to balls, no man in London was more run after than Henry Bryanstone. But he was true to his own words; true, as men understand fidelity, to the dying hope of his poor little sweetheart. No woman *was* dear to him as she, with all her faults, had been once. To no woman did he ever mention the word love after her death.

"Very likely I don't know what the real feeling is," he would say sometimes, as you have once heard him say to Laura Hamilton; "but whatever I can feel of that kind I have felt. Life is very desirable without sentiment. People who like without loving are happy as long as their liking lasts, and part without pain. Why should we want more?"

So much for the lover's fidelity. The husband married again at the end of a year and two days: those two days are important; they form the sharp demarcation between indecent haste and absolute decorum. And this time Mr. Lumley got the worst of it in his household arrangements. Lady Sarah's successor was again a woman of rank (with his hundred thousand pounds and ancestry of cotton-spinners, birth was of course the first thing Farnham Lumley looked for in his marriages), but not again a wax-faced trembling girl, to receive a blow mutely, and die under it. She was a very beautiful woman of eight-and-twenty, the daughter of a poor Irish peer; took Lumley, not pretending love for him, but simply and openly that his money should be the prop of her father's falling house; and within a year from her wedding-day she left him. He tried his best for a divorce, but came out from the trial with his character infinitely more damaged than his

wife's, and bound, not only to be in fact her husband, but to support her still.

Both men and women, I will say, kept clear of him after this second and worse scandal. But what calamity, social or moral, is there which the irresistible buoyancy of money cannot recommend to the charity of society? At the time this story commences, Lady Sarah's grave in Père-la-Chaise was moss-grown; and the second wife, taken back by her family, was expiating her follies with prayers and fasting in a convent; and Farnham Lumley was member for L——, and very well received and thought of by most of the "best" people in London. His wine and horses were irreproachable. His place in Leicestershire was the best bachelor's country house going. And, though this affected women only, it was credibly reported that his wife's lungs were damaged.

But it is one thing to be well received in the great world, and another to be liked there. Lumley had associates, sycophants of both sexes by the score. No woman ever loved him, no man ever called him his friend. For a blackguard to be liked, he must have personal advantages; a handsome face, a genial manner, a hearty grasp of the hand; and making the most of these, he will perhaps get on better than a truer man while he lives. But Lumley's physical and moral nature were honestly of a piece. To no woman could his white lymphatic face grow tender; to no man could his halting, suspicious manner unthaw. He could give you excellent meat and wines; he could not be hospitable. Men might possibly get stupid drunk; they never warmed into conviviality at his table. If you rode a horse of his, you felt the odds were you would lame it, and make an enemy of Lumley for life, or else be brought home with your own neck broken. Of all the names he was ever called, from his cradle to this day, you would undertake to swear that the commonest one of all, "a good fellow," was never applied to him. No one, in the memory of man, had ever patted Lumley on the back. The large majority of men called him "Mr." Lumley when they spoke to him. No little child ever ran up and touched his hand; no dog ever crouched unbidden at his feet. I find myself describing him by negatives; and it really is negatively that a character like Lumley's must be considered. Was he dishonourable, cruel, false, cowardly, profligate? None of these things were more directly proved against him than

against other men : indeed, barring those few unpleasant facts that had come to light during his second wife's trial, no absolute scandal of any kind had ever arisen against Lumley. He was member for L——; he entertained ; he was received. And yet—and yet, as I have said, no woman ever loved Farnham Lumley ; no man ever called him by the name of friend.

Between him and Bryanstone there slumbered an enmity, only the more dangerous because it was carefully masked, at least on Lumley's side, by a studied semblance of forgiveness and good faith. Soon after Lady Sarah's death her husband, while sorting away her jewels ready for any future wife, came upon a small packet of letters, carefully tied up and stowed away in the secret drawer of her trinket-case. They were very short notes, signed by "Henry Bryanstone," and most of them consisted of this sort of matter : "Dear Lady Sarah," or, a week later, "My Dearest Sarah,—May I be at the Rectory at six this evening?" Or, "I send you the book I promised, but you will see me in the course of the morning." Or, "Could you and the girls walk by the river this evening? I am ashamed to come to the Rectory more than six times a week." These were the country notes ; and one or two country mementoes, a leaf or two of myrtle, the petals of a dead white rose lay among them. Then came three or four written in much fresher ink. Very courteous ; very cold ; the mere notes of ceremony which any man may write to any woman in the world ; but upon which Lumley, with the knowledge he believed himself to possess, could put any construction he chose. Lastly, carefully enclosed in paper, a little lock of hair, jet-black and curling as Henry Bryanstone's hair was in those days, with a date, and the initials "H. B.," written in Lady Sarah's school-girl hand on the paper that enclosed it.

Farnham Lumley kept all these proofs of his dead wife's infidelity ; it was a rule of his never to burn anything that might compromise another ; never to write anything that might compromise himself : and when he met Bryanstone in London, a week or two later, held out his hand to him in the street.

In the first access of his passion at knowing the outrage to which Lumley had subjected the woman he loved, Bryanstone had sworn to himself to horsewhip him, like a dog, in the

first public place where he should happen to meet him ; and any other chance than death had stepped between them, I have no doubt whatever that he would have fulfilled his oath well. Living, Lady Sarah was a woman to be avenged, to be saved, to be loved. But dead—what was she dead ? Lumley's wife, Lumley's slave, no longer : but rather his, Henry Bryanstone's, poor little sweetheart, a girl wandering with him in the clover-fields with the setting sun shining on her happy face : a bright-haired vision of all the youth and hope that were dead to him now, and for ever ! Dared he, by act or word, bring the chance of shame upon the memory of his buried love ? Was it not the least sacrifice he could make for her to receive Lumley's outstretched hand, and so leave the world in ignorance of the last dark miseries of Lady Sarah's life ?

He took it—'twas the hardest deed he ever brought himself to do while he lived—and Lumley, reading his face thoroughly as he did so, hated him as only a coward who knows himself to be at once despised, but unchastised for a woman's sake, can hate.

This all happened about seven years ago ; and during these seven years no word of ill-will had ever passed between Lumley and Bryanstone. They met not unfrequently, for Lumley was pertinaciously civil both to Mrs. Fairfax and Mrs. Hamilton, and Bryanstone being much too *laissez aller* to interfere, both these young women—like all other young women in London—were quite ready to receive his attentions and invite him to their parties. Sometimes, but rarely, Lumley even dined at Bryanstone's own house.

And at heart he loathed him more than at the moment when he first read his love-letters to the woman whom his own brutality had murdered ;—at heart swore still to be revenged blackly, trebly on him when the time should come. Bryanstone, after his first outburst of passion had cooled, would no more have stooped to injure Farnham Lumley than he would have stooped to injure a groom whom he had turned out of his service. But Lumley was a man who neither forgave nor forgot. His anger never blazed. His revenge could keep at steady white heat for a dozen years. Had he loved Lady Sarah himself, had there been a leaven of natural human passion in his hatred for her lover, he would have been 'a safer man. It is when a man of his stamp simply thinks he has been outwitted—in love, cards, horses, no matter what—that

his revenge is the most inexorably bitter. He, Farnham Lumley, had been outwitted : deceived into buying a damaged article at full price ; into marrying, with large settlements, a woman whose heart belonged to another man ! And sitting at Bryanstone's table, or meeting him as a friend among men, one unwavering determination never quitted that cowardly heart—to sell him even as he himself had once been sold. For this he would have spent thousands ; for this he would have given the best years of his life ; for this he would almost have incurred the risk of personal danger. Would his hour never come ? Would no tool ever be found to his hand ? He had waited seven years in vain ; and now—

Now Honoria Forrester was about to be introduced to him.



## CHAPTER X.

## HONORIA'S OATH.

As soon as Letty had said her prayers on the succeeding morning to the dinner-party, she began to see it was well that she had not turned Honoria Forrester out of the house. The situation was quite bad enough, without converting it into a public scandal. She could go round to her friends now, and say she had been disappointed in her governess, but had treated her with leniency, poor thing! as Christian charity bade her do; could smooth the whole thing down to Henry; get Miss Forrester away quietly; pay her passage to France, if needed, and then turn the whole idea of his flirtation and of the discovery made by the bishops into a joke. Yes, it was a thing to be thankful for that that vile old Cassandra would have no more scandal to repeat than this, that Mr. Bryanstone had been found with the governess in Mr. Fairfax's smoking-room. And when Laura Hamilton, soon after ten, made her appearance and explained her mission, Mrs. Fairfax, you may be sure, threw no difficulties in the way of Miss Forrester's quiet and immediate departure from the house.

"Only take care you don't have a repetition of it all in yours, Laura," was her parting warning. "My own duty, as a Christian, demands that Richard and I should see the creature into proper hands before giving up our protection over her; but as a friend I warn you what you may expect. Tell her from the first how many days she may stop; and whatever you do, never leave her alone with Henry. I'm not quite sure I should trust her too near your jewel-case. A woman who's bad in one thing, only wants temptation to be bad in all."

In which Letty was wrong. But how can you expect one poor little woman to be at once worldly, orthodox, and tho-

roughly read in human nature? On the whole, Letty talked nonsense seldomer than half the clever people one meets.

"I'm not afraid of my jewels," said Mrs. Hamilton, carelessly; "and I think Mr. Bryanstone quite able to take care of himself. My fears, if I have any, lie quite in another direction. Farnham Lumley and one or two other men dine with me to-day, and of course Miss Forrester must appear. Nothing would annoy me more than for a girl of her description to get up a flirtation with a man like Lumley in my house."

And then, having told their respective little stories, the friends parted, and Mrs. Hamilton went up to the school-room to extend the gracious offer of her roof to Honoria Forrester.

Honoria was quietly removing her few possessions from the school-room shelves when Mrs. Hamilton entered. She received her invitation coldly, and without surprise. In her long watches of that anxious night she had turned over every possible plan that Bryanstone could think of for her, and, with instinctive knowledge of his character, had hit upon this very one of enlisting Mrs. Hamilton's sympathy as the most likely one for him to adopt.

"If he makes her do it, it looks well," she had decided. "It looks like what such people call honour. It points to marriage. If he proposes anything else, I shall start for Rome to-morrow, leaving my lord to follow or not, as he likes. If the woman invites me, I will go there."

She stood up, cold, formal, but perfectly civil in manner before Mrs. Hamilton. "Madam," she remarked, "do I understand you rightly? You offer me the shelter of your roof?"

"I do," answered Laura. "I know that you are parting unpleasantly from Mrs. Fairfax. In order that you may look about for another situation, or communicate with your own people, I ask you to spend a week with me."

"In what capacity, Mrs. Hamilton?"

Mrs. Hamilton looked confused. "As an acquaintance, of course," she answered, but not without hesitation.

"My reason for asking is quite a simple one," proceeded Honoria. "I know very little of English customs and of English ladies, and you must pardon me if I shock your ideas

of good breeding. My experience in this house has, you must confess, been one to set me on my guard."

Mrs. Hamilton was silent.

"At Mrs. Fairfax's special request I undertook to be the governess of her children. On the first day of my arrival I came down, invited by Mrs. Fairfax, to spend the evening in her husband's smoking-room. You, madam, know the reception I received. A few days later, in the same room, I seek the society of Mrs. Bryanstone. Yes, Mrs. Hamilton, I don't stoop to tell falsehoods, I seek his society, because he is a man and a gentleman, will talk to me as a human being for one half-hour, not as a machine for putting French into children's heads, or supplying madam with the taste she lacks at her toilette! In the course of our conversation Mrs. Fairfax, my mistress, enters with her guests. Of the scene that follows I do not choose to speak. You have heard of it, no doubt."

"I have heard it," said Mrs. Hamilton, "and I regret that Mrs. Fairfax should have used the expressions she did. But you seem to forget, Miss Forrester, that I have nothing to do with all this."

"Directly, no. Indirectly, yes!" cried Honoria, readily. "Mrs. Hamilton, let us speak out plainly. It will be best in the end. If I come to your house, will you treat me as an equal, as a guest, or will you, while I eat of your salt, try incessantly to find out whether I am an adventuress or not?"

The words died on Mrs. Hamilton's lips. Nothing daunts people so thoroughly as the truth, blurted out unexpectedly at them in this way; and Honoria was not slow to perceive her advantage.

"I have stated, I am prepared to state on my oath, and to prove, that I lived for seven years with Miss Jarvis, at Peckham. You doubt it. Let us each keep to our beliefs. If I am an adventuress, I shall not hurt you—these things are not catching—but tell me, honestly, before I come to you, what I must expect? To be treated like an equal, or waited for in ambush, like a suspected criminal?"

Honoria Forrester would never have said this to Mrs. Fairfax; but one of her leading mental traits, the one that fitted her so thoroughly for the higher walks of intrigue, was her capability for discerning the higher points of her antago-

nist's character, and utilizing them. Any appeal to Mrs. Hamilton's sense of honour touched her as it would have touched a man—indeed a certain code of her own with regard to truth and falsehood was one of the many "strange opinions," for the holding of which women were wont to call poor Laura masculine.

"If you come to my house you will be as safe from question there as you would be in your own, Miss Forrester. You may rely on that."

"Then I accept your invitation gratefully. A week will give me time to write to my relations in France and prepare them for my reception. But for you, madam, I must perforce have accepted Mr. Bryanstone's offer of help, which, I suppose, would have been my *coup de grâce* with Mrs. Fairfax."

And she shot a look into Laura's face which said to her, as plain as one woman's eyes can say crushing things to another, "And you would have been too foolish to disobey him!" From that moment each understood the other thoroughly; each knew that it was to be a stand-up fight without pity and without quarter, till one or both should fall. But Laura Hamilton's heart sank as she looked at Miss Forrester's beautiful face, and thought of the unequal arms with which the battle must be fought.

Mrs. Fairfax was not equal to the painful task of seeing Miss Forrester again. The children even were not sent to wish the naughty governess good-by. A quarter's salary was put into her hands by the housekeeper; the exact change of which she returned, keeping payment only for the sixteen days she had justly earned; and before noon she had quitted the Fairfaxes' house. Could Letty have heard the oath Miss Forrester swore to herself as she crossed the threshold, she would not have started off so cheerfully that afternoon to tell all her friends of the charming way in which she had got rid of that dreadful creature of Mrs. Forsyth's.

For the oath the dreadful creature took was to become her, Letty Fairfax's, sister.

## CHAPTER XI.

## MR. LUMLEY MAKES HONOURABLE PROPOSALS.

A STUPID dinner-party at Mrs. Hamilton's was a thing not on record. She possessed that precise compound of imagination, tact, and grasp of detail which Mr. Mill tells us is required for organization in daily life. She knew what people to ask together; she knew how to place them at table; she knew how to bring them all out without shining herself. And her cook was irreproachable. The proportion of men to women at her entertainments was as three to one, always; one great reason, probably, why her house was popular; for men, over thirty—and she never asked boys—are ordinarily greatly bored by having to talk to women when they want to eat and drink. After dinner one excessively pretty young lady—Mrs. Hamilton always had one excessively pretty young lady in reserve—would appear in white muslin and be ready to flirt, sing, play, or show off any other accomplishment that might be asked for. At dinner, Mrs. Hamilton herself, and one other woman, who could talk, were the only ladies among the six or seven men who ordinarily made up the party.

At first sight you would not always have given her credit for thorough discernment in her choice of guests; as, for instance, in asking Farnham Lumley to meet Bryanstone. But Mrs. Hamilton knew that personal liking is by no means necessary to bring men out during the three or four hours that you require them to be together at a dinner-party. Lumley never exerted himself to shine more than in Bryanstone's presence. Bryanstone never gave way less to any of his accustomed fits of silence than before the legal possessor of his poor little dead sweetheart. If they played afterwards (and unlimited loo and écarté were, I am sorry to say, not unknown at Mrs. Hamilton's house), it insured the party being

kept up late and with spirit, if these two men were staking against each other at the same table.

"You have Lumley here to vex me," Bryanstone would say sometimes. "I am sick of the eternal sight of that fellow's white face at your left hand."

"I have Lumley to keep you from going to sleep," was her answer. "You are never half so agreeable when you haven't Lumley to talk down into inferiority."

And though she would say this, laughing, it was true. Henry Bryanstone was an honourable, true-hearted gentleman, and had it not in him to injure the enemy whose hand he had once received. But he had quite his share of small weaknesses; was no superhuman or magnanimous hero; and it did yield him pleasure, especially before the few men or women whom he liked, to throw Lumley well into the place, mentally and physically, that nature had designed him to fill.

The other guests on this first day of Miss Forrester's arrival were to be Major Chamberlayne, a man quite undistinguishable in appearance from all other yellow-whiskered majors, but celebrated over London for eating more food and telling more outrageous falsehoods than any other professional diner-out extant; a Frenchman—poor little De Bassompierre, next to Richard, Bryanstone's greatest friend: and the Derwent Keenes. But at the last moment Mrs. Keene was prevented, or said she was prevented, from coming, by illness; and as Mr. Keene chose to appear, "although he might have known he is only asked on account of Caroline," said Laura, Miss Forrester's presence was absolutely needed to preserve the symmetry of the table.

"If you had not wanted me I would have asked not to come down till after dinner," she remarked, as she and Mrs. Hamilton stood together, dressed, before the drawing-room fire. "But I am very glad, as it turns out, that I am here to fill the vacant place."

Mrs. Hamilton looked at her and made a civil answer; was she not on parole to do so? In her heart what would she have given to have had Caroline Keene (of whom ordinarily she was not fonder than women are of their allies), Caroline Keene, Letty Fairfax, any other woman on earth, than this one with her strange, chameleon beauty, her thrilling voice, the nameless grace that was about her in whatever attitude she took, whatever dress, costly or simple, that she wore.

The word "chameleon" really does describe Honoria Forrester's beauty better than any other. You analysed her, and she was not beautiful, certainly, but then she was never twice the same; and this, to somewhat worn eyes, is a charm more potent than all chiselled lines and exquisite classic brows going. Few men past thirty can dine off one dish. Few men past five-and-twenty can be seriously enamoured of a statue. Beauty to men of the world means dress, style, the desire to please, and, above everything else—change.

"Prends garde, ma chère," said an old Parisian coquette to her pale and handsome daughter. "Les jeunes femmes qui ne mettent pas de rouge sont toujours quittées pour de vieilles femmes qui en mettent trop."

Mediocrity, carefully cultivated, is, in this generation, worth all stupid, natural, raw excellence. It might be very well for the men of old Greece to care for hyacinthine hair and naiad-like face. But I fancy in London or Paris Helen herself would stand a poor chance in the nineteenth century, unless Madame Elize had first assisted at her toilette.

It was Honoria Forrester's habit to dress in heavy materials; rich velvets, sweeping silks. To-night she was in a high white muslin, inimitably fresh, as everything about her always was, and only relieved round the throat and wrists by little bands of black velvet. She was too full of figure for this to be the style really most suited to her; but for once the effect was marvellous. Somewhat more flushed than usual, with her soft hair brought low, as her fashion was, on the forehead, but pushed back from the temples, and falling with studied looseness on her neck, Honoria Forrester did not look a day more than nineteen. Laura Hamilton (although she too was looking her best, poor Laura, in an amber silk, and black lace trimming, and with a single scarlet flower set, Spanish fashion, as Bryanstone had told her suited her best, in her black hair), felt herself old and faded by her side.

Bryanstone and Gaston de Bassompierre were the first to arrive. De Bassompierre, although he was almost thirty, and had lived enough to make up half a dozen ordinary lives, looked quite a boy still, with his dark hair parted down the centre of his little handsome head, and his wistful blue eyes, that his friends averred could make any woman in love with him at their first glance. At five-and-twenty the first doctors in the world had told De Bassompierre that he must die; in

five years certainly, at the rate he was living then ; in ten, possibly fifteen, if he chose to take to early hours, careful living, and a warmer climate. He chose the shorter time manfully, and held to the life that he knew must kill him, with an inexorable stedfastness that in a better cause might well have been called heroism. As easily moved as a child in everything else, not Bryanstone, his greatest friend, dared ever speak one word to him about his own health. Worn to a shadow, with the pallor of death itself upon his face, unless occasionally, when the fever of disease lit it into morbid red, De Bassompierre lived on at a pace that would have made havoc even upon a constitution of iron.

"What will you have ?" he said once, when Bryanstone had ventured to expostulate with him. It was a bright summer morning, and as they were driving home after a night of lansquenet in De Bassompierre's carriage, along the silent London streets, Bryanstone noticed with horror that each time he coughed blood stained the poor fellow's white lips. "What will you have ? If I stopped, if I once began to think, I might regret myself, perhaps. As it is, I only feel that I am going to the many along a road of flowers. What do men gain who pass thirty ? They sit in their arm-chairs—but Musette marries ! Thank the gods, I shall never assist at any ceremony of that kind."

This was many months ago, and Bryanstone had never since striven to combat with De Bassompierre's paganism. The end was ominously near now. The greatest man in London for consumption—the man whose fiats have sent forth desolation to how many hundred English households—had been taken this spring by Bryanstone, through the connivance of De Bassompierre's valet, to look at him in his sleep. The examination lasted five minutes, and the sentence again was death. Not all the art in Europe could bring him through another two years. "But unless his friends have religious scruples on the subject, let nothing be told to him," said W—. "In his disease, to take away hope is to take away life at once."

And Bryanstone being, I fear, rather pagan in his own principles, decided to say nothing. Only long after the doctor was gone he found himself standing, with wet cheeks, looking down upon De Bassompierre's unconscious, boyish face. He had never shed tears for Lady Sarah Lumley. But most



Englishmen could easier weep for their friend than for their mistress.

Mrs. Hamilton introduced De Bassompierre immediately to Miss Forrester, and had the pleasure of seeing that she smiled quite as sweetly on him as on Bryanstone.

"But of course you will take her to dinner," she managed to whisper to the latter, when the other men had arrived, and the conversation had become general. "Mr. Lumley must take me, I suppose. Shall you or Gaston have the pleasure of sitting by Miss Forrester?"

"O, let Gaston," said Bryanstone, indifferently. "It must do him good to hear her true Parisian gutturals, after all the wiry English-French the poor fellow is accustomed to."

Nevertheless, when dinner was announced, Mr. Bryanstone chanced to be at Honoria's side, and although De Bassompierre was standing, only waiting to be told what to do, Mr. Bryanstone's was the arm which conducted Miss Forrester to the dining-room.

"Who is that lady?" whispered Lumley to Mrs. Hamilton, on the stairs. "Miss—Miss Warrenner, was it? I did not quite catch the name."

"Miss Forrester," answered Laura, briefly. "Quite a new acquaintance of mine. I thought, from the way you looked at her when you came in, that you must have seen her already, Mr. Lumley?"

"I believe I have," Lumley answered. He knew every detail of the scene before the bishops—both of the imbecile men having imported it straight from Letty's house to their several clubs. "But I am the strangest fellow for forgetting names. 'Did I ever tell,' he said this in the low but perfectly distinct tone that makes its way so unerringly to ears for which it is intended, 'did I ever tell you the ludicrous mistake I made abroad once. It was between three and four years ago. Yes, in September 185—, and it occurred at Homburg.' Then he stopped.

Mrs. Hamilton, who was just considering at which part of the table Mr. Derwent Keene would best sustain his natural vocation of "buffer," did not press for the conclusion of the story. Miss Forrester, who was glancing up into Bryanstone's eyes, a few steps farther on, felt as if an unseen hand had suddenly given her a blow.

"I—I thought there was another step," she stammered, as Bryanstone asked what had made her start so violently? And then she laughed—a horribly forced laugh it was, though—over her own nervousness, and went on with what appetite she might to the dinner-table.

September 185—, and it occurred at Homburg! After all, it might be accidental, though. How many hundred men might have been at Homburg in September 185—, without knowing anything of her? But still, while she strove to reassure herself, every sound of Lumley's voice from the other side of the table made Honoria's heart turn sick; every moment she felt that the *dénouement* of that Homburg story *must* be about to be told! An *épergne* full of flowers stood so as to directly shelter her from seeing him, and for this she mentally thanked her presiding destiny. She knew that she had only to look full in his face to remember him if . . . if indeed he had been one of the actors in her darkened past life. And if discovery was to come, let it, at least, be later—not here in the face of them all, in the very moment when the promises of success seemed so fair, with Bryanstone's eyes upon her, the pleasant tone of Bryanstone's voice in her ears, with Laura Hamilton—the woman who loved him—eager to look on and bear witness to her shameful defeat.

The dinner passed off excellently. Henry Bryanstone, while really admiring Miss Forrester more than he had ever done until this evening, did not show his admiration so openly as to make his hostess miserable. Lumley was more agreeable than anybody had ever seen him before, sedulously attentive to Mrs. Hamilton, genially appreciative of the Major's stories, cordial to De Bassompierre—whom he hated—civil even to little Jemmy Keene (who, relieved from his wife's superior abilities, seemed to think himself rather a clever kind of man, and, drawn out by Laura, made quite a long speech in words of one syllable, on the way he had once seen woodcocks dressed in Corfu). The ladies sat a long time over dessert, as was the habit at Mrs. Hamilton's house; and when they at length rose to go, Farnham Lumley, who hastened to open the door, made a very flowery speech in deprecation of any enlightened woman thinking it necessary to follow the barbarous British custom at all.

He fixed his eyes steadily on Honoria while he spoke; and sweeping close beside him as she went out, she felt herself forced, whether she willed it or not, to meet them. A second

glance told her all. She had never known him personally; but she remembered his face as well as a few days before she had remembered Tontin's; had been in the same public rooms with him a dozen times at least. It might have been worse, truly; but still it was bad enough. Only—for in this second of time Honoria's subtle brain could calculate the possibility of a hedge—only Farnham Lumley was reported to be Bryanstone's bitterest enemy. . . . More chance for her so, at least, than if the discovery had been made by De Bassompierre, or any other of his friends.

She was perfectly calm when the women were alone in the drawing-room. In a life of constant hazard like hers, the moments in which the dice-box is still on the table are alone the moments of agony. As soon as she saw her throw, whatever it was, Honoria Forrester's plucky nature rallied. As she had said on that afternoon in Harley-street, when she was speculating over her chances of seeing Bryanstone, so she said now. "Let the worst come, and I accept it. Two thousand pounds, and my freedom will be mine still. Not I, but my fate must act out the remainder of this night's game."

"Your dinner was charming, Mrs. Hamilton. It is the first English party I have seen at which people talked."

"Well, we had material," answered Laura, "except poor Mr. Keene—and I find one Mr. Keene a necessity, somehow—the men were good talkers. You have met Mr. Lumley before, I conclude?"

"Mr. Lumley? Never." And Honoria looked up innocently from her coffee.

"He mentioned having seen your face. I concluded he must have been a guest of Mrs. Forsyth's."

"O, dear no. With the solitary exception of Mr. Bryanstone, Mrs. Forsyth never had any man under fifty to dinner during the time I lived with her. But Mr. Lumley may possibly have seen me at the Opera. I believe I have been there four times altogether in my life. Mrs. Lumley is not here to-night?"

"Mrs. Lumley! Do you mean his wife? Well, Miss Forrester, I certainly thought every one in London knew all about Farnham Lumley's domestic affairs. He married first"—and then, which was what Honoria wanted—Mrs. Hamilton gave a short epitome of his two ill-fated marriages, omitting, you may be sure, Henry Bryanstone's name in the history.

"But I don't see what broke the first wife's heart," said Honoria. "Probably she was consumptive, and her relations sentimentally called the disease heart-brokenness—if that is the correct English word."

"Possibly," said Mrs. Hamilton, curtly. "At all events, it was a very good thing for herself, and everybody else, that she died when she did."

"I forget whether you said she was pretty?"

"O, not in the least," answered Laura, decisively. "A woman with a baby-face and short, floss-like hair. I did not know her personally, but I recollect seeing her at a ball given by the ———th at Hounslow, the last time she was ever seen in public, and thinking her in very bad style indeed, and almost plain."

Laura Hamilton stopped abruptly. The whole *mise en scène* of that ball; Henry Bryanstone's pleading face; Lady Sarah's fresh young beauty and shining dress and water-lilies; all rose before her and made the words die in her throat. And Honoria needed to ask no further question. She had heard vague rumours of Bryanstone's first love, and of the cause of Farnham Lumley's hatred to him. As she looked in Mrs. Hamilton's eyes she knew that these rumours were true: this woman, with the baby-face and floss-silk hair, had been loved by Bryanstone. In the perilous pass wherein she found herself now, was it quite impossible to utilize Lumley's long-cherished hatred into an instrument for her own preservation?

The entrance of a young woman in white tarlatane and blue ribbons prevented her from feeling her way farther; so she took up a morsel of microscopic embroidery and patiently awaited the coming of the men, while Laura Hamilton and her dear little friend "Fanny" went through the customary rites of female affection before the fire.

Fanny was Mrs. Hamilton's after-dinner amusement for the time being; and, it is needless to add, was quite a model young woman for this purpose. She was exactly eighteen (Laura's young ladies, like her pages, never exceeded a given age), with great hazel eyes, rather wide apart, a tiny nose and mouth, peach-coloured skin, low straight forehead, and enormous quantities of *crepé* brown hair; just, in short, what Leech's pencil has taught us to consider the type of English young-ladyhood. When she went to the country, Fanny was a very good little thing indeed, and looked after the poor, and co-

alesced with the curates like one of Miss Yonge's heroines, or her own elder sister of ten years ago. In London she knew everything about everybody, from the Archbishop of Canterbury to the owner of the cream-coloured ponies, and was quite ready to give very unbiassed and outspoken opinions of her own respecting them all. She had been everywhere in Europe, and beyond Europe; and talked all languages with the same unabashed, ungrammatical fluency. No one ever inspired her with any reverence; no one had ever seen her put out of countenance. The last mistake in Deuteronomy, or the last divorce case; man's place in nature, or the forthcoming sale in St. John's Wood; religion, geology, prize-fighting, croquet, *écarté*, love-making; nothing was too great or too small, too orthodox or too heathenish, for Fanny to discourse upon. And in the majority of cases her discourses were really quite as well worth listening to as those of elder people.

There is a great outcry made sometimes against the fast, unblushing, outspoken girls of this generation. But not surely by persons who have made the law of demand and supply their study. That marriageable women are—as they are—should be their vindication to men. Who calls for the article? Where is the cause of the effect? In taking a young person like Fanny to pass your life with, there is at least this to be said—you know better what you are about than men did in the old time when girls were tongue-tied and broken in to bashfulness. It is a moot question still whether the British or Gallican be the safer school of training for future wives; and the Eastern custom of keeping women veiled has certainly, up to the present point of the world's history, not been strikingly successful in its results. But these are my suggestions only.

As Honoria Forrester glanced up from her embroidery at Fanny's face, and listened to the subjects Fanny was discussing, she formed the cynical opinion that the difference between the people talked of and between those who talked was one of degree only, not of kind.

But then Honoria Forrester belonged to a class, and so of course could not afford to be either charitable or philosophic.

A pretty little dimly-lighted conservatory opened out from Mrs. Hamilton's back drawing-room; and by the time the men came up Miss Forrester had left her companions, and was

bending over some white azalias and camellias by the door of this conservatory in one of the graceful attitudes that suited her figure so well.

"Has Laura been snubbing her, after all?" thought Bryanstone; "or is it only to show a new pose? I suppose I must go and ask her. The best way with such women is always to speak the truth—'tis the only attack against which they can bring no counter weapon of their own."

But while he was just hesitating whether to do so or not, Lumley, who had that moment entered, walked straight over to the conservatory door; and Bryanstone, much too indifferent to contest the prize, took his place by Fanny's side, and listened, well amused, to the very lively dissertation she was commencing with De Bassompierre as to the last, and by no means faintly-coloured, scandal of the clubs.

"Do the plants look healthy? Not that there's very much light to tell by."

Honorina Forrester betrayed not the faintest token of noticing his familiarity.

"I am afraid there's a little blight among them; look at this rose-leaf." She picked one and came up to his side. "Don't you think that it looks like blight?" And she held her beautiful white arm towards him with a gesture that, if he chose, he might have taken for one of humble, despairing entreaty.

"O, I don't understand these subjects," he answered, taking the leaf a moment and then flinging it away. "I don't go in for anything pastoral or innocent—do you?"

"Monsieur!"

"Ah, I like to hear that. It reminds me of old times—reminds me, too, that you are half a foreigner, and, like Mrs. Hamilton, wont faint at the smell of a cigar. May I?" he drew forth a case from his pocket. "Smoke's excellent for aphides, you know." Without waiting for her answer, he took out a cigar, put it between his teeth, then produced a tiny cigarette of rose-coloured tissue paper and offered it to her. "I always go about provided for myself and my friends too. Let me recommend you this. It's Latakia, and irreproachable." And, as he spoke, Farnham Lumley threw himself down into a low easy chair just inside the conservatory, and stared up insolently into Honorina Forrester's face.

"Thank you," she replied quietly, after a moment's silence; "I never smoke now;" and then she turned away her face from him, and went on again with her examination of the aphides.

"Ah," remarked Lumley, after striking a light with cool assurance for his own cigar, and replacing the cigarette in his case. "You don't smoke now, don't you? the time for cakes and ale and the rest of it is passed. Lord, Lord, what a life it is! Miss Forrester," abruptly, "how long have you been living in England?"

"For years and years," she answered; but she bent her face closer down as she spoke. "I was two years with Mrs. Forsyth, and before that I was for seven long years in a ladies' school."

"In a what?"

She was silent. What good was there, she began to think, in trying to parry the coarse thrusts of such an assailant as this. Better let him say his say; threaten her with his enmity or his love, whichever it might be; and then let her make her election. Brave him or accept his terms.

"In what place did you say you lived before you went to Mrs. Forsyth?"

"I said in a ladies' school, Mr. Lumley."

But in spite of her forced calmness her voice could not but shake a very little.

"A ladies' school! O, good God!" and Lumley went off into one of his odious fits of chuckling laughter. "Well, that's neat. A ladies' school. Did you ever take your pupils to Homburg, now, for the benefit of their health?"

No answer. But the fingers of the strong white hand farthest away from him clenched convulsively. Honoria was as tempted as she had ever been in her life to hit Farnham Lumley straight in his cowardly white face, then and there, and let the worst come.

"You must pardon me the question, but I was in Homburg myself, between three and four years ago, and your face recalls a scene I witnessed there so strongly that I can't help asking it—shall I tell you what that scene was?"

"If you choose."

"Well," he went on smoking as he talked, and brought out every word with the slow, deliberate gusto of a man who is epicurean in his enjoyment of his listener's torture. "I must

tell you first that Homburg is a wicked, a **very wicked** place. The Church of England service is certainly performed twice every Sunday, but even this does not keep people from being vicious; in short, there's gambling and every other kind of immorality going on from morning till night. I don't shock you? Of course not. You are a *femme artiste*, above little drawing-room pruderies. In the autumn I speak of there were heaps of foreigners, Russians especially, in Homburg, and the public gambling tables not being kept open late enough to please some of these gentlemen, very pleasant little private parties, or suppers as they were called, used to be got up after midnight. The scene I am going to tell you of took place at one of those suppers. There were seven or eight men present, and also, Miss Forrester," here he lowered his voice, "three or four of your sex. I need not speak much of these ladies. It is said that at some of the German establishments beautiful faces are occasionally hired by the proprietors of the banks to lure fools on at rouge et noir and roulette. Possibly some of these faces, in a non-official capacity, may have been present at the entertainment I speak of. We will call the ladies themselves by the first names we think of—Minie, Lisette, Nita"—here he paused a second; "anything you will. They were pretty, you may be sure, and young, and not totally inexperienced either in lansquenet, écarté, or champagne. Champagne brings me to the point—ain't I a fool now? don't I tell stories vilely? Some of the men had been drinking, perhaps—to be more literally true, the whole party had been drinking—and a hot quarrel, between two youngsters, a Frenchman and a Russian, was got up at supper. Well, the dénouement was the most sickening thing—on my word, the most sickening thing I ever saw in my life. The Russian goaded on, bit by bit, at last openly accused the other of foul play. The Frenchman answered by a sneer, and in a minute—So!—had a glass decanter hurled across the table at his head. Instead of him it hit a woman, the prettiest in the room—Nita, let us say—who, with the instinctive goodness of you all, was leaning towards him trying to pacify him no doubt at the moment. She gave no scream—plucky nature, poor beggar, she must have been—but started up to her feet with a face of stone, then staggered back, with the blood pouring over her white dress, to a sofa. At first they thought he had killed her, for the cut was deep and mortally close to the temple; but in a few days I saw her out again,



and I was told the Russian, who was a very good fellow when he wasn't drunk, made it up to her. The worst thing for a woman would be the scar that must follow upon such a wound; unless, indeed, Miss Forrester, she had the sense to wear her hair classically low upon her forehead as you do."

When Lumley's narrative was over, Honoria Forrester stood for a moment silent. In that minute her determination was formed. She turned quickly; came and seated herself on a little low chair close to his side.

"Finish your story!" she said, in a singular kind of compressed whisper. "I know what you are trying to say. Have it over quick!"

She raised her eyes, and they fell upon Henry Bryanstone's face. She saw that while he listened to Fanny and De Bassompierre he was in reality watching her. Great Heaven! if one syllable of what Lumley said should have reached his ears!

"My story? O, I think it is finished," answered Lumley; but the insolence of his manner was somewhat abating. He began to see that his victim was not a fool to be trifled with at his pleasure. "If—if—I mean the rest I've got to say isn't a story at all, but an hypothesis, Miss Forrester."

"Whatever you have got to say, say it at once, if you please."

"Well, just suppose now," he took his cigar from his mouth, and as he spoke amused himself by trying with one finger to stroke off infinitesimal portions of its ashes. "Suppose that the woman we have called Nita was to have got tired of her life—or her life of her—and by some fluke we can't at present fathom, to turn up among quasi-respectable women, and among men of the world, in London. Her aim is marriage, of course. The aim of every woman always is marriage. And as she possesses no common good looks there seems a fair possibility that she will one day find the necessary fool, veil, ring, and parson that make up the ceremony. The fool, indeed, is already almost on the hook, when, in an unlucky moment, some one turns up who remembers her in her old, and far more agreeable character—remembers, in fact, the adventure that marked her for life at Homburg. The position is a trying one for her, is it not?"

"Not a bit," said Miss Forrester, promptly. "Not a bit. If she can't outwit the scoundrel who threatens to betray her, which is doubtful, a woman of that kind would never be without hosts of resources in herself. There are more fools than one in the world, any day."

And she examined the mourning ring on her white hand with a smile that was not in the least counterfeit. Like a true artist, Honoria always warmed to her work. The most losing part she had ever played afforded her zest while she was playing it.

"You are right there," said Lumley, after watching her face steadfastly. "Nothing would be too vile for such a woman as the one we speak of. Don't think for a moment I mean to cast such a slur upon her as that. What I was going to suppose is this—that the man who remembers her and the man she means to marry are friends; in other words, that they hate each other like death. How if one of them, wishing to wipe off an old debt, should offer to befriend Mademoiselle Nita? He knows the world of Englishmen better than she does; knows that to be brought out in London as he, if he chose, could bring her out, would give her a far greater chance with the weak-brained fool she is aiming at than she could ever have alone, unnoticed and poor. Suppose, I say, that circumstances like these should arise, and such an alliance should be offered her, what would her answer be?"

Miss Forrester raised her eyes again, and looked full for a moment at Bryanstone's handsome, unsuspecting face; then drew her chair abruptly back out of his sight, and laid her hand on Lumley's arm. He was a coward physically rather than morally, poor wretch, and actually winced and turned pale at the sudden grasp of those iron muscular fingers.

"I—I didn't mean——" he stammered.

"Yes, you did," she interrupted him, savagely. "You meant all, and much more; and what I mean is, that you shall say your meaning out in plainer words. I'll make it easy for you. Two people—the man a blackguard, the woman an adventuress—are each trying how to sell an honest-hearted gentleman, Henry Bryanstone by name. The man, poor chicken-livered wretch! thinks to get his dirty vengeance with least risk to

himself by making the woman his tool. The woman is ready to accept his terms—but not his insolence, by Heaven! What he means to say, he must say out!”—her grasp tightened ominously,—“and what he undertakes he must keep to. Nothing, as he remarks, is too vile for such a woman to do. Why, curse you!” and she let go her hold and looked straight and close into his eyes; “I could murder you at this moment. I know the Thug embrace. I could have you dead before any of them could get to your side.”

He turned ghastly white (she meant nothing by all she had said; it was a little bit of preliminary acting she always went through with men of a certain temperament). “I’d no intention of offending you,” he gasped out. “I’m sure I thought I said what I did very delicately, and I’m quite in earnest in my offers of doing you a service. My carriage and horses would be at your disposal. I’d ask Mrs. Hamilton to accept my opera-box for the season, and—”

“And expect what in return?” interrupted Honoria; but in a gentle tone. The delicious tangible money offers fell like familiar music on her ear.

“Simply what I told you,” he answered. “Why need we use hard words to each other, Miss Forrester? I’m sure I’m offering the most unselfish thing a fellow can offer—to be made free use of as a harmless rival against another man. We’re friends, are we not? Our compact is sealed!”

“O, friends, certainly!” she answered,—“or allies, which to such people as us means a great deal more. Here!” She gave him her hand; and he was just raising it, excessively nervously, towards his lips, when Mrs. Hamilton made her appearance in the doorway.

“They are talking of loo already, Mr. Lumley;” but in a moment her eyes took in every detail of the position. “What do you say? I think it’s a great deal too early yet.”

“Well, I think you’ll have five without me,” he answered, Laura noticed not at all in his accustomed affected drawl. “I was just going to challenge Miss Forrester to a little quiet *écarté*.”

“Do as you like; but I am afraid we sha’n’t make up a table without you. You know Fanny and I don’t play.”

“O yes, do join, Mr. Lumley,” said Honoria in her softest

voice, "and I'll come and take a lesson and bring you luck. I know nothing about any of your English games." And she rose, and a moment later re-entered the drawing-room on his arm.

Seeing her there, with her white dress and shining golden hair, the vision of his little sweetheart rose up, with sudden sharp pain, before Henry Bryanstone's memory. Was this woman to be Farnham Lumley's next victim?

As he thought that, he went nearer to liking her than he had ever done yet. Honoria gave a glance into his face—and knew it.

The cards were playing well.

## CHAPTER XII.

## LOVE UNDER THE LAMPS.

AND Farnham Lumley kept to his promise. In a fortnight Honoria Forrester, with her golden hair and dark blue habit, splendidly mounted, and always with Lumley by her side, was one of the best-known women in London. Laura Hamilton was beginning to think she might as well ask her, poor thing, to spend another month in her house; and Letty, when she heard daily of more and more successes, quite fretted over her own ill-luck in having quarrelled with her handsome governess.

"And if you should meet her, be civil to her, Richard," she commanded her husband, "and affect to treat our little quarrel as a joke. Every one says Mr. Lumley is infatuated; and Cassandra Peto told me to-day his wife has only an inch and a-half of lungs left, and that he makes no secret as to his intentions about Miss Forrester. I think the situation for the present frightfully compromising; still, poor dear Laura is quite accustomed to anything of that kind; and if it all ends in marriage it would be most annoying for me not to be on terms with Lumley's wife. Now, how would it be, I wonder, to ask them all to dinner here quietly?"

"After turning her out of the house a fortnight ago?" answered Richard. "No, Letty; make up to the young woman if you think her morals in any way patched up by being under Lumley's protection, but don't subject yourself to the chance of refusal from the cad himself. I'm sorry for you, child," he added; "but even the cleverest hedge must fall through sometimes. To back God and Mammon equally heavily requires a great deal of discretion. Still, considering that Mammon was so nearly out of the running at the time you put your money on, I don't see that your judgment is *much to blame*."

"O, don't be blasphemous, Richard," interrupted Letty, angrily; "and if you wont ask him to dinner, go at least and leave your card on Mr. Lumley to-day."

Now, in saying that Miss Forrester was "brought out," I don't at all wish to convey the idea that Duchesses and Marchionesses rushed to invite her to their entertainments; for they did nothing of the kind. Indeed, if they ever noticed her riding by Farnham Lumley's side, the grand ladies of Belgravia judged, I have no doubt, pretty much as Mrs. Fairfax did on the celebrated occasion when she surprised her at Henry Bryanstone's feet. But there are a great many worlds in London besides that of Marchionesses. The world to whom Farnham Lumley introduced Miss Forrester was almost exclusively that of men; and it was precisely here that Honoria was surest of success. No man who came across her was uninfluenced by her charms of person and manner; and the somewhat equivocal and mysterious position in which she evidently stood to Lumley rather increased than lessened the interest with which they regarded her.

"Whatever she is, she's too good for him," was the unanimous verdict of all who watched the progress of the intimacy. By no one was this opinion more heartily indorsed than by the man for whose benefit the whole game was being played—Henry Bryanstone himself.

Shelter his folly from his own heart as he might, he *was* jealous of Lumley already. He was not in love one bit with Honoria Forrester. He would as soon have offered to put his neck into a halter at once as have deliberately offered to marry her. With the solitary exception of Farnham Lumley, he would, after Letty's cruelty to the girl, have been grateful to any man who would have taken her fairly off his hands, and so have ended the matter. But with Lumley it was different. He felt that Lumley had deliberately sought to cut him out and had succeeded; felt—so well did Honoria act her part—that the girl was bringing herself unwillingly to accept Lumley and Lumley's money (with whatever specious offer of marriage that consummate scoundrel chose to offer) through pique against himself.

Was he again to stand by—he would ask himself this when Honoria, silent and submissive, as she rode along by Lumley in the Park, would give him a trembling little smile or furtive quick withdrawn glance as he passed,—was he again to stand

by and see the same old story enacted? Another woman who loved, or who might have loved him, given over to Lumley's arms?

Happily he had wise Mentors to assist his own reason in combating any passing sentimentalism of the kind. Richard Fairfax, who possessed the happy detective inspirations of a child, declared his conviction from the first as to the whole thing being a dead case of roping. That scoundrel Lumley hadn't the look of a man who meant winning, and was ready to run wide at any moment, if Henry would be only fool enough to try to lead. De Bassompierre, with the refreshing business view of love affairs that Frenchmen always take, never would have it otherwise than that Mees Forrester was making use of Lumley's money, as she would have done of Bryanstone's or any other man's, to bring herself publicly forward in the best possible style before the notice of the town. Laura Hamilton was unwearied in producing little anecdotes which proved, with logical clearness, how readily Honoria pocketed all the tangible proofs—*id est*, rings and bracelets—of Mr. Lumley's regard. And Henry Bryanstone listened to them all, and was wise; wise, till the next sight of the bent-down golden head so close to Lumley's in the Row made him a fool again!

All this time Mrs. Hamilton kept steadfastly to her promise of regarding her guest's secret and past life as inviolate; kept to it so well, indeed, as greatly to disconcert Honoria; who, relying more upon the broad principles of human nature than upon any adventitious deviations from the same in the shape of honour, organized many neat little traps for her hostess, in the shape of blotting-cases left open, notes carelessly lying in work-box drawers, and the like incentives to friendly inquiry.

One day, however, when she was absent—with Lumley, of course—Bryanstone chanced to call; and, as luck would have it, Miss Forrester's desk was again lying ostentatiously open on a writing-table in Mrs. Hamilton's little morning-room. It was some minutes before Laura made her appearance, and Bryanstone, while he waited, began turning about the books on the writing-table in an absent mechanical way, as he had a trick of doing. The open desk in process of time came under his hand; and never doubting that it was Laura's he opened one of the compartments and took up a

small book, or rather a full-grown tract, that was lying on the top of a pile of notes and papers (I must really reiterate that it was a habit of Bryanstone's to ransack Laura's writing-case and work-boxes with the most perfect freedom, either in or out of her presence, and that the foolish woman was never more exquisitely pleased than to find him thus occupied). The book was the same comforting little discourse on perpetual perdition which Honoria had put away among things to be kept on the night of Mrs. Forsyth's death. Bryanstone opened it at hazard, and found these words written on the title-page:

"Miss Honoria Forrester. An offering of good-will from her pastor and well-wisher, the Rev. Alfred Prettyman. Given at the examination of pupils. 'The Cedars,' Peckham, December, 185—."

"The Cedars, Peckham." Then Tontin's recollections and Mrs. Hamilton's suspicions were alike at fault. Miss Forrester in this, at least, had told the truth. "December, 185—." As he re-read the Reverend Alfred's feeble little cramped handwriting, it occurred idly to Bryanstone to wonder what he himself had been doing at that time. He thought back over the last four or five autumns, and recollected he was in Scotland with Richard. They had rented a moor between them, and the sport was magnificent. Remembering this impressed the date for ever upon Bryanstone's mind—Bryanstone, who generally forgot everything to do with other people's affairs within five minutes after he heard them!

Decidedly the Fates were working dead in favour of Honoria Forrester.

While he still held the book in his hand, Laura Hamilton came in.

"I wish, Mrs. Hamilton, you would tell your friends to keep their desks locked," said Bryanstone. "I began prying about just now among your possessions, as usual, and find myself suddenly in the thick of Miss Forrester's love-tokens. If it happened to Lumley instead of myself, it might have been serious. Look here."

Mrs. Hamilton took the book with the tips of her fingers, as one of Madame de Brinvilliers' friends might have taken a flower or pair of gloves from that lady's hand, glanced over the writing on the title-page, and gave it back to Bryanstone.



"You see she really did live at Peckham, after all, Laura."

"I see nothing, except that Miss Forrester leaves her desk open with an object," said Laura, decisively. "We needn't reopen the subject of her innocence, I think. It belongs a great deal more to Mr. Lumley than to us now; and will you please put the book back exactly as you found it. I don't want Miss Forrester to think I have any concern in her affairs."

"Well, I don't suppose any of us have," said Bryanstone, with slightly forced carelessness. "She is out, of course?"

"Of course: on a new horse of Mr. Lumley's, and with little Jemmy Keene with them, as chaperon. What do you think it all means?"

"I don't trouble myself to think about it," Bryanstone answered, throwing the book down on the table, and walking away to the fireplace. "I don't trouble myself about them at all; and in another fortnight I shall have forgotten Miss Forrester's existence. I'm going away, Laura. I came to-day to tell you so."

"Going away, in the very middle of the season, Mr. Bryanstone? What does that mean?"

"It means that poor De Bassompierre is ordered to get away from the English east winds till June at least, and that I am going with him. We start for the Mediterranean in Armytage's yacht on Monday."

Laura came up close to his side. "I am very glad you are going, Henry—very; more glad than I have been of anything since I first knew Miss Forrester. You won't see her again before you start?" And she laid her hand on his arm—a rare action for Mrs. Hamilton, who was a woman extraordinarily chary of caresses. "You will let Lumley have the course to himself, will you not?"

"Most decidedly," said Bryanstone. "Miss Forrester is a vast deal too good for him, but she's old enough to know her own mind, and certainly is not in any way under my protection. As to seeing her again, of course I shall—why not? Why, I want you all to come to me on Saturday, Laura. You are going to the Opera, I know, and you must come to my house to supper afterwards. You and Miss Forrester, and Fanny, if you choose: and I'll ask Lumley and some other fellows to meet you. Don't make objections, Mrs. Hamilton. The thing is settled; and please don't look so preternaturally *suspicious*," he added, looking down kindly into her serious

face. "I am not two-and-twenty, nor at all likely to be brought to book by having Mr. Farnham Lumley played off against me, cleverly though Miss Forrester manages the game."

And hearing such excellent sense from his own lips, Laura could not but promise to let him spend one more evening in the danger of Honoria's society.

"Lumley will keep by her all the time," she thought, when Bryanstone had left; and she stood listening, as she always did, to the last sound of the wheels that bore him from her. "And if not, Henry knows at least what her game is."

And when Miss Forrester came in, radiant from her ride, Laura had the exquisite pleasure of announcing to her, with a quiet smile, that Mr. Bryanstone, "in spite of the Derby and everything, was going to Italy for the spring," and of seeing that Honoria's face changed horribly, notwithstanding all her self-command, when she heard it.

Henry Bryanstone's departure was indeed a desperate, an utterly-unexpected blow to Miss Forrester. Unless he could be brought to speak before Monday, her chance with him would be gone. She knew that a man once out of sight, and as little in love as he was, is lost. She wrote at once a note to Lumley, telling him, in couched terms, of the news; and from that day till Saturday neither received his visits nor left the house. She didn't eat; she walked about her room at night instead of sleeping; and when Bryanstone saw her for the first time at the Opera on Saturday, her wan cheeks touched him.

Adventuress or no, she was a beautiful woman, acting love with consummate art for himself. As he watched her face from his stall she looked to him in her pallor, not unlike what Lady Sarah had looked that day in her father's library, when she fell upon his breast and besought him to save her from Lumley! Lady Sarah became Lumley's wife. To what worse fate might this new victim be drifting? And if she were indeed playing Lumley off against himself, where was her sin? She gave him a long intreating look just before the curtain fell on Margaret "gerettet;" and when she followed Mrs. Hamilton from the box five minutes later, Bryanstone stood in the passage and offered her his arm.

"But—but, Mrs. Hamilton," she stammered, looking down with admirable confusion. "Will you not take Mrs. Hamilton?"

"Lumley will do that," said Bryanstone; for Lumley of

course was on the scene. Then he added in a whisper, "surely for once you will accept my services, Miss Forrester? It is for the last time, you know."

She answered by stealing her hand under his arm, and for a second seeming involuntarily to cling to it. Then she turned her face abruptly away, and kept it so, as they followed the rest of the party along the lobby.

"This horrible east wind penetrates everywhere," said Bryanstone, when they came to the stairs; "and you are not half wrapped up. I must take care of you."

He drew her cloak tighter across her throat, and while he did so Miss Forrester abruptly bent her head. Bryanstone knew, rather than felt, that for an instant her lips rested on his gloved hand, and his brain became fire. He was a young man still, and Honoria was beautiful, and Lumley was his rival; and— Well, let me say the worst out, 'tis a part of Bryanstone's history I don't care to dwell upon—temptation altogether was too strong for him, and he succumbed!—whispered Heaven knows what jealous folly about Lumley, in her ear, as he took her down the stairs behind the rest.

The theatre was crowded that night; and following their party, they had to walk about a hundred yards to get to their carriage. When they were in the open Haymarket, Honoria turned to him with a face of stone. Even in the flare of the gaslight Bryanstone could see how deadly white she was.

"Mr. Bryanstone," she said, "I thought till to-night I was utterly miserable, but you have taught me it is possible to be more miserable still. You ask me not to love Mr. Lumley. I have never loved him; but I will *not* give him up! As soon as he is free Mr. Lumley offers to marry me, and I am too poor to refuse him."

The tone, the look, the words were all in their way perfect, and yet they missed their mark. The solitary word "marry" had always power to restore Bryanstone to his senses, much as the threat of cold water restores a young lady in a faint to consciousness.

"I was a fool, Miss Forrester," he said bluntly. Lumley was worthier of you I should not have spoken so. Will you forget it, please?"

"I—I can't forget anything you have said," she cried, almost with a sob; and then, mercifully, they found them-

selves close by Lumley and the rest; and Bryanstone put her into the carriage without another word. He was on the very edge of loving her. The touch of that poor little humble kiss was on his hand still; but as he drove rapidly along the Regent's Circus towards Piccadilly, he felt just as a man might feel who had tottered over a hideous precipice, and been saved.

"Laura was right," he thought. "I oughtn't to have seen her again. However, thank God, the danger is past. What on earth did the woman mean by kissing my hand if she wants to marry Lumley?" he asked himself next. "Is it possible"—this really was the first time such a monstrous thought crossed his mind—"that she can want to marry me? No, no, no! A little passing infidelity, nothing more; but a solemn warning, nevertheless. I must never walk about by lamplight with her again. Marry—great heavens!"

The sight of Richard Fairfax's face at the door of his own house put the finishing stroke on Bryanstone's restoration.

"Dick," he said, after leading him mysteriously aside into a little morning room on the ground-floor, "I've something to tell you before we go upstairs, and it's this—I believe I have had a great escape—a miraculous escape to-night. I've been talking like an idiot to Miss Forrester, and she mentioned marriage."

"You don't mean to say so?" cried Richard, looking excessively innocent. "Well, that shows me that Miss Forrester knows how to adapt her conversation to her company. Marriage isn't a subject much in her line, you know. Tontin has spotted her at last—remembers time, place, and everything. In the winter of 185—, Miss Forrester was an actress, and not at all a good one, in the French plays at Vienna. He was coiffeur at the theatre at the time, and remembers her perfectly. She could not have heard much about marriage there, could she?"

"She was not there at all, Richard; I happen to know all about that. In December, 185—, Miss Forrester was getting tracts given her by a parson at Peckham. Tontin's an ass."

"But Tontin knows all about it, my good sir!" When Richard said "My good sir," it was an indication that all the energy of his nature was aroused. "Remembers her name—Liza—Annette—whatever it was she called herself. She'd been hissed off the stage for something in Paris, and had

come to Vienna to try her luck. Just you mention the date and Tontin's name to her, and see how she takes it."

"Not I," said Bryanstone, indifferently. "If she had not begun to talk of disagreeable subjects, I believe I might have made a fool of myself. However, I didn't; and you and I have no inquiries (whatever Mr. Lumley may have) to make about her character."

"No; that we certainly have not," answered Richard. "If Tontin is right, as I'll swear he is, it's a case in which inquiries would be ridiculous. Inquiry implies doubt. As to Lumley," he added, when they were going up the stairs, "I believe he knows a precious deal more about the young woman than we do, and has no occasion whatsoever to search into her antecedents."

The women were still alone when Bryanstone and Richard joined them. Mrs. Hamilton and Fanny together, of course; Honoria standing alone before a picture that hung in one of the recesses, in the back drawing-room. It was a picture of no great worth, that Bryanstone had bought of some modern artist in Germany; but that he valued more than all the rest of his possessions—a picture of a girl's figure standing among corn-sheaves, and with the bright and childish face turned full to the setting sun.

Had he ordered this picture to be painted? Had the face been copied from any original likeness in his possession? That no one knew, save Bryanstone; but whoever saw the picture, recognised in it at once the portrait of Lady Sarah Lumley. Lumley in his own heart never felt his hatred to Bryanstone so intense as on the rare occasions when he found himself in his house, and in the presence of this picture. If it had been an actual portrait of his wife he might have found courage to resent Bryanstone's hanging it on his walls; but the dress was the dress of a German peasant girl. Bryanstone himself called it a fancy sketch of Goethe's Gretchen. And still the eyes that had once implored to him in vain; the delicate blue-veined temple that his own brutal hand had struck, were there; not to awaken his remorse, but to goad his never-dying revenge into fresh energy every time that Lumley looked at them.

He arrived with two or three other men, while Honoria was still standing before the picture, and came up to her at once.

"How goes it for our side?" he asked, bending over her and speaking in a soft whisper. "Well, unless I mistake?"

"As badly as it can go," she answered abruptly. "Indeed the game's up. What's the good of my deceiving you?"

Lumley's face got black as night. "If you're selling me, you'll repent it," he said, between his set teeth. "You may take your oath to that. Women who sell me do repent of it generally, I can tell you."

She laughed carelessly. "I'm not a bit afraid, Mr. Lumley. I've braved men twice as big and quite as brutal as you, often, and never once come to grief. Never! What woman is this a picture of? Do you know? Some poor sickly girl who would have been afraid of a threat or a blow, I should say. Look at the great frightened eyes, and weak faltering mouth, and——"

"—— her eyes, and her mouth, and all belonging to her!" interrupted Lumley, coarsely. "As if I hadn't been driven mad by her snivelling idiocy times enough when she was alive!"

"What, you knew her, then? Mr. Lumley, you don't mean to say that this is a picture of Lady——"

He caught hold of her wrist with a passion that gave Honoria infinite satisfaction. It showed what materials lurked under all Farnham Lumley's cowardice. "Don't you mention her name!" he said, hoarsely. "I don't choose it. I won't hear it from your lips!"

He bit his own till they were bloodless.

"Ah, you loved her, then?" she remarked, quietly. "Mr. Lumley, I can understand what you feel at seeing her picture openly in Henry Bryanstone's possession."

"I did not love her," he answered, in a voice choked with suppressed passion; "but she was my wife, and it's cursed bad taste in Bryanstone to have this picture in his room, and if one thing could make me hate him worse than I do, it's to see her here. Hate! I loathe, I abhor him! And now to think you're letting him go, that the blackest revenge I could have on him" ("Thanks," murmured Honoria) "is to fall through. By G——! it sha'n't, though! Miss Forrester, I swear, standing here before *her*, that it sha'n't. What is there wrong? Did you use my name free enough? Did you tell him I have offered marriage as soon as I am free to marry? Will promise

it in writing—anything. Because you may do all this and more—much more!”

His voice actually trembled; his eyes glowed with a red sullen fire. Honoria Forrester, who was neither given to personal likes nor dislikes, felt herself shudder as his hot uneven breath came on her cheek.

“I as fully believe in your sincerity as in my own, Mr. Lumley; but unfortunately our intentions wont alter Mr. Bryanstone’s. He had an opportunity of speaking not an hour ago, and let it pass, and on Monday he leaves England. *Voilà!*” And she shrugged her shoulders expressively.

“But did he give way in the least? You know what I mean. Is the man jealous, spoony—whatever word you call such foolery by—or is he not?”

“Well,” said Honoria, looking down, “he certainly is jealous, but not matrimonial, Mr. Lumley. I do not deceive you.”

“Never mind: that’ll come. Leave the rest to me. Do you swear he’s jealous?”

“I swear he said he was.” But she brought it out with something like difficulty, and glanced furtively into the other room. Standing beside Farnham Lumley, Honoria felt herself human; felt a sensation dimly akin to love towards the man upon whose hand her lips had rested not an hour before.

“That is enough. When do you say he leaves town?”

“On Monday next, and is to be away for the rest of the season.”

“Now, Miss Forrester, what do you mean to do with yourself in the interval?”

“That is what I was going to ask you, Monsieur. I shall leave Mrs. Hamilton in a day or two, and have not another friend in England.”

“Not the lady in whose house you lived seven years?”

“Not the lady in whose house I lived seven years.”

“And suppose—mind, it’s only a supposition—suppose I was to say, ‘Miss Forrester, our compact is at an end. You have been unsuccessful, and I have nothing further to say in the matter.’ How would you act?”

“O, in that case,” answered Honoria, with admirable coolness, “I should thank you, Mr. Lumley, for a score or so of excellent mounts, and for what you have shown me of London

life. Your bracelets and rings I should return you (for I am not a well-born woman; I have my ideas of honour), and in four-and-twenty hours I should be in Paris, a city in which, as you may believe, I am not actually without resources. *Allez!* Is Mr. Bryanstone the only man in the world worth winning?"

"And suppose all this, and that you meet Bryanstone abroad again—in a different position, of course—what answer would you make if——"

"That would be my affair, not yours," she interrupted him shortly. "As long as I'm playing on your side I sha'n't sell you. Content yourself with that. On the day we dissolve partnership, my best wish will be never to see your face again, whatever I might feel about his."

"I like to hear you talk so," said Lumley, with a chuckle. "I like to see the stuff you're made off, by G— I do. It's the winning kind. And now, mind, this is all talk. I'm not going to give you up, and you're not going to give him up. Why, his going away at all shows he thinks himself in danger. Would a man like Bryanstone leave London in May, and miss Chester and the Derby, and everything, unless he knew he was in some confounded mess?" Honoria again smiled her recognition of his delicacy. "You must keep your head above water well while he's away; I'll do that for you. I know scores of women who'd ask any one I bid them; and in August you shall meet him again. He goes every year to the Surtees in Norfolk, and I can get you there as easy as possible with the Haighs. Yes; unless I'm a greater fool than I take myself for, I'll have something ready for him on his return. And make what play you still can to-night," he added, in a whisper, as supper was announced, and people began to move; "a single word from a fool like Bryanstone would be something to hold him by, if you could only get him to speak it."

But to get this word spoken was by no means an easy matter. The moth had been too nearly singed to fly of his own free will into the flame again. Bryanstone sat by Laura at supper, and without in any marked manner seeming to avoid Miss Forrester, never spoke to her, except with other people joining in the conversation, all the night.

"Unless I risk something, I must lose all," she thought. "Lumley's blackguard instinct is right. One word from Bryanstone would be worth more than a legal bond from him."



But how to get it? He was near it, very near, when I looked at him in the Haymarket; can I put together nothing of the same kind now?"

She made her resolve in another minute; and just as Mrs. Hamilton's carriage was announced, walked up to Henry Bryanstone's side.

"Give me your arm to the door," she said, without looking at him. "It's the last request I shall ever make of you."

He obeyed, as a matter of course; and Lumley, who followed, and took Laura Hamilton, contrived so adroitly to favour some delay on the stairs, about Mrs. Hamilton's fan, or Miss Fanny's shawl, that Bryanstone and Honoria were again alone for some three or four minutes, outside the door. Miss Forrester utilized them thus. She had worn a single half-blown tea-rose as her sole ornament that evening, and as Bryanstone stood, perfectly silent, for the others to come, she suddenly took it from her dress, and held it up to him.

"Will you take it if I ask you?" she cried, eagerly. "For an hour, for five minutes, will you keep something that has been mine? There," and she put it hurriedly in his button-hole. "Will you wear it? Will you let Lumley see you with it—yes, or no?"

To say that Bryanstone was unmoved, would be to say that he was a man without any of a man's common weakness or common passion. He was moved greatly; but not to the extent of forgetting for an instant what he was about.

"I am glad to possess any mark of your favour, Miss Forrester; but as to rivalling Lumley, it is out of my ambition. You have made me feel that already. Lumley is going to marry you."

"Marry!" she repeated, almost wildly. "Marry! and what do I care for that? Wear my rose an hour, a minute, and I care more for it than if any duke in England offered me marriage."

She turned to him beseechingly, and the wind blew a little tress of her perfumed silky hair across Bryanstone's face. How the rest happened he never knew; but in another instant, with or without his own design, their lips met.

"I have resolved," she murmured. "I will not marry him. And from you—I hope nothing! Good-bye."

Her hand clung passionately to his for a moment; then she

got into the carriage, and in another minute Mrs. Hamilton and Fanny came out, and she was gone.

"Come in, Henry," cried out Richard, with the joyousness that always entered his voice as soon as the women of any party had departed. "I should propose lansquenet and tobacco, for a change, as soon as you've done gazing after those young women's carriage."

They played till long after day-break; and Bryanstone, who was in extreme spirits, and, contrary to his custom, drinking tumbler after tumbler of champagne, won everything.

Farnham Lumley never could bear to lose his money; and as he stood shaking Bryanstone's hand, and between two and three hundred pounds to the bad, his cadaverous face looked deathlier than usual, in the wan green light of the early morning.

"You win both ways," he said, and glanced with his evil sneer at the faded flower on the other's breast. "Cards and love too. It's devilish hard lines for us, who lose at everything."

When the dark clouds had, long afterwards, gathered round Bryanstone's life, more than one man who was present remembered the expression of Farnham Lumley's face as he spoke those words.

## CHAPTER XIII.

NELLY.

THE last light of an August sunset is resting, warm and full, upon the solitary parsonage-house of Lowick-on-the-Wold. Lowick-on-the-Wold is one of the least civilized parishes in Norfolk; the dwelling of its spiritual guide one of the most hopelessly dreary that ever entered into the heart of man to build. A low, small-windowed house of black granite, girt in on all sides save the south by barren waste-land, and with only a homely strip of garden dividing it in front from the stony unfrequented road that is euphonized by Lowick-on-the-Wold into the name of the village High Street.

At the present moment, however, the little parsonage is looking its brightest; looking, as it does, on about a dozen exceptional occasions, perhaps, out of all the three hundred-and-sixty-five days of cold and wet and grayness that make up an ordinary Eastern Counties English year. A tender, violet-red hovers, rosy and trembling, athwart the whole grand stretch of lonely moor. The air is still; so still, that you can hear the mile-away sighing of the sea upon the sand-ridged shore. The smell from pinks and honeysuckles in the parsonage garden mingles with the fruity sweetness of the moorland gorse. The grasshoppers chirrup with as loud a joy as though their life were to last out an Italian, not a Norfolk, summer. So much for the *mise en scène*. Now for the human element that gives it interest.

A plain country girl and a London man of the world are walking slowly, the girl's hand on her companion's arm, along one of the garden paths; and from her eager upturned face and rapt attention while he discourses, you perceive at once what old story is being repeated here; perceive also that on one side alone is the rehearsal genuine, or likely ever to become so.

Can you wonder at this? Look at the girl more closely; divest her of the false grace which youth and the fading light may possibly at this moment lend her; look at her closely, and say if any man accustomed to, and proof against, the handsomest women in London, could be in danger of losing his head about such a face as this?

It is a face all a-glow with expression; a face with intellect, with love in it; a face that could not lie. Let me record first the solitary beauty Nelly Bertram possessed, and then—to plain facts. The complexion is sallow; the eyes quite commonplace hazel eyes; the features irregular and large. One or two redeeming points are to be discovered in her as in every normally-developed human creature. The girl has average bright brown hair; snow-white, though not perfectly even, teeth; and delicate little fragile-fingered hands. She is not ugly. A man of a certain disposition might marry her, and at the end of six months find her better in his sight than all the beautiful women in the world. But she is decidedly, irredeemably plain. All the most intoxicating draughts of young women's lives, all pleasures derived from personal vanity, from ball-room triumphs over others, are, and must ever be, forbidden nectar to her. And she knows it, and laughs—she is quite a child, remember—to think that it is so. Plain as Nelly Bertram is, she believes that she has found her heaven already, and would not change places with the most seductive empress, the fairest prince's wife in Europe.

Her heaven is the hope that she has won Henry Bryanstone's heart. She knows nothing either of his excellence as a *parti*, or of his nonlikelihood of marrying. Knows nothing of his first dead mistress, or of the dangerous last love into whose toils he so nearly fell only three months ago in London. All she does know is that he seems (did he not ever after seem so to her?) a great deal more than mortal. That his face, his manner, his London-cut clothes, the very atmosphere he somehow brings with him into her uncle's poor household, all appear like emanations from another sphere to her, poor little Nelly Bertram, who never spoke in her life to any young or handsome man above the grade of a farmer's son before! I don't know whether the girl would have fallen down and worshipped in the same unquestioning way if the fine exterior had been all; if her idol had chanced, as very handsome men in very well-cut coats often do chance, to have

neither brain nor soul in addition to his outward endowments. However that may be, and long, certainly, before Miss Bertram could know anything whatsoever of Bryanstone save that he possessed a handsome face and well-toned voice, she loved him, and was satisfied. And this love of hers was too intensely unconscious, too simply the eager outburst of feeling long unnaturally pent in, for any of the artificial miseries of common artificial sentiment to have mingled in it as yet. Mr. Bryanstone was there; Mr. Bryanstone was to stay another fortnight in her uncle's parish; had said that he should come over two or three times a week at least to the parsonage as long as he remained. Nelly wanted no more. She neither hoped nor feared. She loved—with as much earnestness, as much passionate fervour, as it was in her strong, untutored, childish heart to give.

Kindly reader, whose outraged sense cries out aloud against Miss Bertram's forwardness, let me tell you more plainly how this girl was placed. Not to be forward at seventeen, a young woman must, you are aware, have been trained. The idea may not be pleasing; but it is true. Any girl who has been brought up utterly without artificial or female training will be, at the age of seventeen, what we of the world term forward; something of the unconsciousness of shame which clothes a little child in so fair a garb lingering about her still, and hindering her from concealing up to the standard mask of conventional bashfulness. Nelly Bertram had been brought up, not only without a woman's training, but without any training at all. Before she was six years old, both her parents died, and from that time till the present she had lived in the house of her uncle, Frank Bertram, the vicar of Lowick.

Such a life of loneliness was probably never led by mortal child before. Neighbours they had none, save Sir Harry and Miss Surtees, of The Place; great county people, who spoke two or three words to Nelly in church (also to the Sunday-school children) every Christmas and Easter. Companions she had none; amusements she had none. The Rev. Frank Bertram was a bachelor, and hated women; so, not even the farmers' wives and daughters ever crossed the vicarage door. All the year round he breakfasted at nine, dined at three, supped at eight. After breakfast Nelly studied with him for two hours regularly: and they were not bad sort of studies *on the whole*; dry, and bearing no possible reference to any-

thing a young woman could need to know about while she lived, but better than what girls are generally put through, inasmuch as they taught her how to reason, and how to be patient and silent. The three middle hours of the day were entirely her own; and these she spent out of doors, in all seasons of the year, and in all weathers. Then came dinner, after which Mr. Bertram invariably shut up the windows and door of his very small sitting-room, drew down the blinds, threw a huge silk pocket-handkerchief over his head, and slept.

Under the influence of one of those eccentricities to which old persons are not unfrequently subject, it was his will that his niece should remain in the room while he slept. Although he was excessively deaf at all other times, he averred that the slightest noise always awoke him from his after-dinner nap. Consequently, an hour and a-half out of every day Miss Bertram had to spend without speaking or moving; during the winter months without reading; and in an atmosphere that nearly stifled her. After tea, in fine weather, they walked abroad. But as Mr. Bertram's pace was slow, and his speech didactic in the extreme, the girl never felt that she enjoyed even her summer evenings on the moor. In winter, their nights were occupied till ten o'clock by backgammon, cribbage, or double' dummy; then came prayers, all of the eighteenth-century school of divinity; and then bed.

This was the life Miss Bertram had led, unchequered by any extraneous excitement whatever, save her confirmation, from the time she was six years old until the day she first met Henry Bryanstone. He came on a visit to the Surtees, was introduced to Mr. and Miss Bertram on the occasion of one of their half-yearly calls at The Place, walked half of the way home with them, and called the next day at the Parsonage, and the next. In a week he had made kindly little unmeaning speeches to Miss Bertram by the score, and in return she looked up to him and loved him, as only a child who has never known what love is in its life before, can love. So much of the state of the poor little girl's heart, and of her exceeding ignorance, it is needful openly to confess. In justice to Bryanstone, I must also say that he had never, up to this evening certainly, dreamt of the parson's niece caring for him otherwise than as a child cares. From the first moment he saw her, he felt the interest in her which any perfectly thorough nature, either in

man or woman, never failed to inspire him with. Partridge-shooting had not begun. There was no one he cared about at The Place. Nelly Bertram, in her simplicity and straightforwardness, amused him; and the walk to her uncle's house across the moor gave him an appetite for his dinner—always a great source of interest to men in a country house when there are no field sports on hand. Of the passion of love, or of any feeling howsoever remote to it for Nelly herself, he felt no more than he would have done for Lilian or Polly Fairfax, when he used to take them to the play, and amuse himself over their criticisms on the performance.

"And you decidedly refuse to come to-morrow, Miss Nelly? No argument that I could bring forward would change you in your decision?"

They had left the garden now, and were standing together upon the common, watching the pale white moon as she rose upon the cloudless expanse of that still crimson summer sky. Nelly's hand was on Henry Bryanstone's arm yet, and he held it in his own as it lay there; and the girl, being ignorant that such an action was morally wrong, from a man who has not yet spoken of marriage, suffered things to take their natural course without a struggle.

"I don't think I should enjoy it if I went, Mr. Bryanstone. I don't understand archery, and the only white dress I have isn't ironed; and, besides, none of these grand ladies know us, and if I did go there would be no one to take any notice of me."

"Don't you think I should?"

"I don't know, sir. It's very different noticing me here, where there's no one else, to what it would be at a grand archery fête at 'The Place,' where you would have a dozen or more beautiful young women, all ready to take you away from me."

Henry Bryanstone laughed; something in the simple jealousy of this speech could not but please him. "A dozen beautiful young women to take me away from you? I must say I should like to be told who they are. Not either of the Ladies Clinton, earl's daughters though they are, nor Miss Surtees herself, nor Gracie Haigh, nor—nor—" but Bryanstone hesitated.

"You have not enumerated all yet. What of the new beauty who you told me arrived last night?"

"Miss Forrester!" he answered carelessly. "O, well, she is handsome, undoubtedly; and being half a Frenchwoman gives her such a different style in dress and manner to the women she's among now. But Miss Forrester and I know each other already: the time of danger is past."

Nelly had spoken of no danger; and in mentioning Miss Forrester's name a quarter of an hour before, Bryanstone had not said that he even knew her till she came to Norfolk. Involuntarily a chill crossed the girl's heart, the first foreboding chill of all the bitter jealousy she was hereafter to know, and she made an excuse to take her hand away from his arm.

"You have known Miss Forrester before? Has she been very much admired? Does every one—I mean, do you—think her perfectly beautiful?"

Bryanstone laughed. "Perfectly beautiful? No, certainly not. Miss Forrester is a very handsome woman, and knows how to make the most of herself. She ought; she has had a good many years to practise in. Her best point is her hair, perhaps,—hair and complexion; but really, I don't think I care enough about such things to remark them closely. All the women I've ever been fond of have been plain, Nelly."

When men say that to a woman who is not handsome, do they imagine themselves to be saying something at once generous and softly flattering to herself? Miss Bertram winced under his words with a positive bodily pain. "The women he had been fond of"—his sisters, his godmother, no doubt; and he classed her with them, and tried to soothe her vanity by depreciating beauty in others. For young though she was, don't think Miss Bertram was so devoid of all the natural instinct of her sex as to believe one word Henry Bryanstone said in the matter of Miss Forrester's charms.

"Plain people have their uses, no doubt," in a little constrained tone this; "but their place is not at archery fêtes. I hope you will have a fine day to-morrow; the clear way the moon rises promises well."

Bryanstone turned and looked down into her face; if he saw no very happy expression there, could she help it? She was not happy. In the last five short minutes the serpent had stolen into her paradise; the glory had gone from her dream. She doubted, feared, envied, was a child no longer. For the world she could not have put her hand on Bryanstone's arm.



and let him hold it there, as he had done, unquestioned, a quarter of an hour before. As he looked down upon her face she blushed guiltily, and for the first time since she had known him avoided meeting his eyes.

"You foolish little girl! Do you really dread failure so much? I thought only women who had conquered and been defeated knew anything about these things. Don't be such a child—for you can't mean what you say. Get your white frock ironed, and put on your best sash, and come to 'The Place' to-morrow. Why, I'll promise, if you like, never to leave you for one minute the whole day."

Miss Bertram refused, hesitated, promised, on the express condition that Bryanstone would let her take her chance, and not victimise himself in any way. And then she remembered suddenly that it was getting late, and that she must go home.

At the little wicket-gate that opened from the back garden upon the common, Mr. Bertram met them. The hobby, the solitary amusement of the old man's life, was insect-catching; and he was radiant, flushed with success, at the present moment.

"A *Saturnia Pavonia* Major, a female *Saturnia Pavonia*," he cried, speaking very loud, as deaf people do, in his excitement, and flourishing his huge green gauze flapper about Bryanstone's head. "I've been looking for her for seven years, sir. I've waited for her for hours upon the moor, with my nets and my lanthorn, in vain; and now, to-night, a fortnight later than she generally appears, I've caught the finest specimen you ever set your eyes upon. You'll come in and see her, sir, of course? That's right, and I'll show you the *Miselia Aprilina* I took last spring, and one or two extraordinarily fine specimens of *Sphingidæ*, while Nelly looks after our supper."

Bryanstone had never been in the little parsonage at meal-time before. Nothing, indeed, but the unprecedented excitement of the *Saturnia Pavonia* would have induced Mr. Bertram to invite him, or any other guest, to his table; and for the first time in her life Nelly felt, as she helped to lay the supper, how small their parlour was, how humble the fare, how homely the attendance. But any such small shame was dispelled the instant that Bryanstone came in from the garden with her uncle. He was interested, but not to a point

at which even Nelly could detect the faintest shade of acting, in the Saturnia. He knew nothing whatever about natural history; but for a man living in the country, as would some day be his lot, pursuits of this kind were an actual necessity. He endeared himself to the old woman-servant's heart for ever by praising the salad; he made Mr. Bertram hear every word he said without shouting at him—a thing Uncle Frank detested. He ate with the hearty good-will that very well-bred people can assume, as they can assume everything else (even hunger, an hour and a-half after a seven o'clock dinner), and which is so specially gratifying to people who offer humble fare at wild and barbarous hours, as the Bertrams were doing.

"A promising young man—a very promising young man, that," said Uncle Frank when Bryanstone had left. "He's going to send me one of these new illustrated catalogues when he returns to town, and 'twill be a nice employment for you, Nell, to cut out the labels. An intelligent, well-mannered young man. He seemed greatly interested by the information it was in my power to give him about the habits of the different insects in this locality."

In the majority of works of imagination it is the custom for old people to envy the thoughtlessness of the young. In reality, young people, if they think at all, must be forced, amidst the bitter vital suffering of their life, to envy the perfect egotism, the happy animal contentedness, of the old. Young as Nelly Bertram was, she felt strongly at this moment that her uncle—with his quill and little bottle of cyanide of potassium, stabbing obstinately healthy or obese moths, and watching with intense interest some quivering delicate lace-flies he had already crucified on bits of cork—was happier far than she was. His toys could not be taken from him. With camphor and watchfulness he could defy even time itself, while for her—

For her—in spite of all Bryanstone's pretty speeches, of the kindly pressure of his hand, of his attentions to her uncle, of his promises to walk over and meet her to-morrow,—in spite of all this, Nelly's heart was sinking within her. Some sounds from the great battle we must all fight had, for the first time, reached her ears; and she felt how weak, how lonely, how poorly-armed she was to enter upon the encounter.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE FIRST LINK IN THE CHAIN.

As a rapid sketch of Honoria Forrester's career, not the careful delineation of a score of other people, is the work that I have set myself to accomplish, the reader must excuse me if the accessories of my picture are but faintly blotted in; and if two or three figures alone receive such finish as it is in my poor power to give.

When, shrinking and leaning upon Bryanstone's arm, Nelly Bertram found herself on the lawn of Lowick Place next morning, a party of twenty or thirty persons were already assembled there. A defter hand than mine would put all the picture before you of this assemblage; every detail clear, sharp, telling as the finish of a Dutch painting. But such capacity is not mine. I might elaborately describe the low grey manor-house, its pointed slate roof, and mullioned windows shining in the noonday sun, and with its two giant cedars casting dense and fragrant shade upon the new-mown grass; I might describe old Sir Harry's silver hair and bland insincerity as he glided hither and thither among his guests; his daughter's haughty face and cavalier air, as, with the independence that long-motherless young ladies of thirty are apt to gain, she confined her attentions solely to the men of the party; I might record that Lady Susan and Lady Alatheia Clinton were tall and blonde and dressed in blue, while Gracie Haigh, short and brune, and already weighted with six seasons' experience, was dressed in pink. But when I had given you such a catalogue—carrying it on through a dozen more people, young country ladies, all in white muslin and innocence, young country gentlemen in velvet shooting-coats, and betraying extreme distrust of their own conversational powers—by how much would you be furthered in your interest concerning what I have really got to say? None of these people

interest me; none of them have a hold upon my imagination; while, in sharp contrast, two figures rise clear, vivid, living before my sight just as they did before Nelly Bertram's on the fatal day when she first saw them come across Henry Bryanstone's path. One of these is Honoria Forrester; the other I will shortly attempt to bring before you.

"We'll go away from the crowd, Nelly," Bryanstone remarked, when, Miss Surtees having given her two cold fingers, he saw how unnoticed and unamused the girl was likely to be. "There's Miss Forrester, tired already, sitting with Arundell under the cedars—shall we go and join her? No, it isn't Arundell," he added, after they had walked on a step or two; "Arundell is yonder with Gracie Haigh. Whom in the world has she got hold of now?"

She had not got hold of anything very alarming to the most jealous or suspicious lover's peace. Miss Forrester's companion was a man of about thirty; a short, high-shouldered man, singularly slovenly dressed in a well-worn grey morning suit, and with the rustiest brown wide-awake you ever saw a gentleman have upon his head. His face was not absolutely ugly, or even unprepossessing. It was a determined, dogged, Jewish face; but the black eyes looked at you full, calm, unabashed. You associated him at once with the lowest grade of book-making men at races, with gentlemen of the prize-ring, with the small back-parlours of cigar-shops, in which sherry-and-soda is given gratis, and loans, on good security, at twenty-five per cent., to the young in difficulties. But your mind did not go much further. You assigned professional blackguardism to him, as a thing of course; not amateur villany in any of the Protean forms with which modern fiction has made us so familiar. And you were right. Anthony Stretton was simply a very commonplace blackguard, indeed. He was not, I verily believe, depraved. He loved money, he loved pleasure; he was indifferent as to how he came by them. He had neither the ambition nor the ability, unaided, to become more than the thoroughly vulgar scoundrel that he was.

In addition—I should rather say, in glaring juxtaposition—to his dingy clothes, Mr. Stretton wore a huge breast-pin of a very undraped ballet-girl, carved in pink coral; a chain, a cable rather, of suspiciously yellow gold; and as many rings—turquoise rings, signet rings, sapphire rings—as his short,

broad, gorilla-looking fingers could carry. I may add that his black hair was long and stiff with pomatum; his whiskers arranged into two shining sausage-rolls from his temples to his chin; and that his really well-got-up feet were displayed to the full by the peculiar fashion in which his drab-coloured cords were made to fit tight round the ankle. A hideous white bull-dog displayed the hair-lip which is the blue blood of bull-dogs close behind his heels; and from the genial expression of his face, seemed perfectly ready to make short work of any or all of the company at the slightest intimation of his master's will upon the subject.

"Mr. Bryanstone!" cried Miss Forrester, holding her hand out to him as he came up; "what in the world have you been doing with yourself? I have not seen you since yesterday at dinner. Let me introduce you to Mr. Stretton—Mr. Stretton, Mr. Bryanstone. Such a surprise for me, fancy! As we were sitting down to breakfast this morning, Mr. Stretton walked in; one of my oldest friends, just returned from Rio de Janeiro, and found me out here; and now dear old Sir Harry thinks he must have been very intimate a century ago with Mr. Stretton's father. So strange, isn't it?"

And she looked with a look of perfect ease and thoroughly unmeaning kindness that only a Frenchwoman can give at Nelly.

Bryanstone responded to the familiar nod Mr. Stretton accorded him by a profoundly cold bow: then he introduced Miss Bertram to Honoria.

"Come and sit down by me," she said instantly, and making room really, not conventionally, for the girl at her side. "I'm not going to shoot in the first match—are you? O, you don't shoot? Really! I thought all girls shot in the country. Upon my word it's a great deal of trouble for nothing. I never got one prize this summer. Think of that, Mr. Stretton," turning round to that gentleman; I've been shooting at every match and archery fête in Essex for the last three months, and have not got a prize yet."

"Well, that's only fair," was his answer. "Lucky though Miss Forrester is, even she can't expect to get all prizes and no blanks."

It sounded to Bryanstone simply a somewhat coarse compliment to her beauty; and regarding it so, he could not but remark the deep flush that passed across Miss Forrester's face.

But Mr. Stretton evidently saw, or thought he saw, some deep or humorous meaning in his own speech. He repeated it; he chuckled over it; he glanced repeatedly into her blushing face; and finally was so overcome with the sense of his own wit, that he seemed obliged to walk it off, for he rose, took one or two short turns, by this time shaking with that suppressed noiseless laughter peculiar to all the Hebrew race, and finally disappeared, closely followed by his dog, into one of the side-walks of the grounds.

Then, and not till then, did Bryanstone speak.

"Where, in heaven's name, did you pick up that man, Miss Forrester?"

"You may well ask," said Miss Forrester, smiling. "Did you ever see such an odd being in your life? Who'd guess that he had taken a high degree at college, or come of a really respectable family? Confess now, when you saw me with him just now, you thought that (like the heroine of one of your English novels) I had taken a sudden fancy for Sir Harry's head-groom?"

Not a woman living ever told falsehoods better than Honoria Forrester. In many of her accomplishments she was commonplace enough; in others on a par with the very few only; but in this she was simply unrivalled. The lies of inferior artists are sure to be over-finished, or too weakly sketched. Hers were truth itself; the very perfection of all art—nature so exquisitely embodied in art as to be nature still.

She was at this day, she was at this moment, in the most difficult position in which any human being could be placed. A tone too eager, a tone not eager enough, must have aroused Bryanstone's suspicions; and by virtue of these few quiet words she not only laid suspicion aside, but, as he himself told her afterwards, made him ashamed of the rudeness of his own remark.

"I never thought it possible Miss Forrester could, of her free-will, be in any unworthy position," he answered, quickly. "But I did think some stranger, of whom you knew nothing, had contrived to get himself introduced to you. Of course, if Mr. —, Mr. —, this person we speak of, is an acquaintance of yours, it's a sufficient recommendation of him. How well Gracie Haigh looks to-day, does she not? She's one of the very few women whom the exigencies of archery bring out to advantage."

"Do you think so?" said Miss Forrester, carelessly turning her head one instant towards the young person spoken of; then looking away again, "Well, yes, I think poor Gracie does always look better in a high dress" (the Haighs, instigated by Lumley, had been taking her about with them half the summer), "now that she has grown so thin. It is frightful how a few London seasons tell upon one's good looks," she added, addressing herself to Nelly. "You country young ladies are fully indemnified for the quiet lives you have to lead by the time you retain your youth. Who'd guess, to look at me now, that I am only three-and-twenty?—and I am only three-and-twenty, Mr. Bryanstone. I carry about the certificate of my baptism with me to show to anybody who says I'm older."

"You don't mean to say you were ever baptized?" returned Bryanstone, looking straight into her eyes. "Well, I shouldn't have given you credit for such weakness as that."

Nelly Bertram saw considerable profanity and not the slightest wit in this remark: consequently she did not smile. Miss Forrester remarked and commented on her gravity instantly. "Mr. Bryanstone shocks you, I see, Miss Bertram. He used to shock me once upon a time; but really I'm getting too used to everything to remember when to be shocked and when not. What, the first match over already? Then I must be getting my armour on. Mr. Bryanstone, will you help me?"

She stood up, holding her arm out while he buckled her sheath on; and then, looking at her full, Miss Bertram was able to make up her mind more fully than she had done yet on the subject of Honoria Forrester's beauty.

["She was liker to what Uncle Frank tells me of Rubens's women," Nelly recorded in her diary, two days later: a diary full of attempts at fine writing and extreme childishness, as became her age; "liker to one of the old Fleming's *sensuous divinities*, all healthy carnation and white, and solid flesh and blood, than any Englishwoman I have ever known. Her hair alone made her beautiful; such a mass of supple golden-yellow hair as it was, with here a tress of redder, brighter hue running through its silky abundance. No man, after looking at her hair and vivid skin, and round rich lines of figure, could, I am sure, ever stop to ask himself whether Miss Forrester was beautiful or not. She took the senses by storm. All *grace or intellect* in other women was thrown into a sort of

insignificance beside her, just as I have seen my delicate-hued spring flowers look pale when the great red rose of June first flouts them all with her *imperial smell and colour*. Have you ever remarked blue-gray eyes in which the pupil is always unnaturally dilated, eyes with heavy eyelids and a kind of suppressed glow in their sleepy depths? If you know of such eyes, and their possessor is a woman who loves you still, take heed as you look forward to the day when she will tire of you! If that day has come, look upon yourself as a man with a mark against your name; with a dangerous, deadly enemy, only quiescent now on the principle upon which tigers and *other deadly creatures* usually crouch before they spring. These are the blue eyes that betray, that stab, that poison physically sometimes as well as morally. Miss Forrester possessed them. Her forehead was low, broad, heavy. Her chin massive and slightly projecting. Her mouth well formed, but large, with radiantly white, small teeth, and moist and scarlet lips that never fully closed. For the rest, her hands were fair and blue-veined, but shaped like a man's, and set on vigorous wrists and arms. Her feet and ankles were her best point, and she knew it, and displayed them, as only *such a person* would, before the eyes of the world! So much for detail. I looked at her as she stood there, her face towards me, her arm held up to Bryanstone, and I decided that her beauty was hateful; decided, too, that it was the beauty to lead men's hearts captive, and that I had about as much chance beside her of winning Mr. Bryanstone's regard as one of my own Sunday-school children would have had in competing with the best scholars in Oxford or Cambridge for a University prize."]

"Well, what do you think of her?" for Mr. Stretton having come up again to her side, Bryanstone lingered behind with Nelly. "What do you think of the London beauty you were so anxious to hear about? I was right, wasn't I? Her hair and complexion are her best points."

"I don't think I understand beauty," answered Miss Bertram, pettishly. "I don't like Miss Forrester's expression, and I think the shape of her hands hideous. Mr. Bryanstone, it was very condescending of Miss Surtees to invite me here to-day, and very good-natured of you to take the trouble to bring me; but all I said to you last night was perfectly true. Now I am here no one wants me, no one cares to speak to me."



For answer Bryanstone made her take his arm ; led her to the targets, introduced her to the young ladies, introduced her to the men, and himself kept close to her side during the whole remainder of the afternoon.

And this, her first day of pleasure, was the first day of positive pain in Nelly Bertram's life. She suffered acutely—with the wild unreasoning pain of the child that she was. For, amidst all Bryanstone's kindness, all his attention and forethought for her enjoyment, she noted that wherever he went Miss Forrester's eyes followed him ; noted the tone in which she spoke whenever they passed each other in the crowd ; the expression of flattered vanity, if of no deeper feeling, that came across his face as he answered. The girl was jealous. Can any elaboration be needed to strengthen the meaning of that one word ?

## CHAPTER XV.

## MISS FORRESTER FEELS ELECTRIC.

A DÉJEÛNER, or cold dinner, was served upon the lawn at the conclusion of the archery. Henry Bryanstone, in spite of Honoria Forrester's looks, nay, in spite of direct orders from Miss Surtees, made himself Nelly's attendant still; and as Miss Forrester was away—actually out of her sight—the poor child enjoyed the hour of eating and drinking more than she enjoyed anything else on that day.

"And you are quite resolved to leave before the dancing?" Bryanstone whispered to her, after the ladies had risen to leave. "Well, don't go at least before I see you again; I have something particular to say to you."

Now if Bryanstone had said as much as this to her the day before, Nelly would simply have waited any number of hours at his bidding. But with fear, with jealousy, with knowledge, had come shame. She was no longer innocent enough to be bold; and all she most desired now, was to get quietly away from a scene in which she felt herself to have no place. If—if indeed he wished to speak to her, let him walk over to the parsonage to-morrow, and speak to her there. It was Mr. Bryanstone's place now, she thought, to wait upon her; not her on him.

There was nothing in the demeanour of any of the young ladies towards her to alter Nelly's resolution when they reached the drawing-room. Miss Surtees was a gentlewoman, and knew what was due to herself in her own house; so she spoke five words to her about her uncle's health, and also told her where she could find some old annuals to look over for her amusement. Miss Forrester did not look at her by any means with unfavourable eyes. She even smiled and nodded with what Nelly thought an insufferable air of patronage whenever she chanced to meet her eyes. But Miss Forrester always

collapsed on principle in the absence of men: and she did so now, yawning piteously whenever her particular friend, Gracie Haigh, tried to make her talk. As to the rest of the young ladies, they just ignored Nelly's existence. She was not a thing to fear or rival, or even pick to pieces; she was nothing. And they talked of their own successes, and of each other's defeats, and of the delightful day they had had, and of the delightful evening they were going to have, with no more heed of her presence than that of the faded, dislocated court beauties of twenty years ago (those impossible "Finden's Beauties," as they were called) that lay upon her lap.

So when the servant announced that Miss Bertram's man had come for her, Nelly obeyed the summons with exceeding willingness; and felt, more than she had ever done before, how good and home-like old Pearce the gardener's face looked to her when she found him in the court-yard, waiting, laden with wraps and umbrellas, for her departure. She had already reached the gate that led out from the east fruit garden to the open warren without, when she heard a quick and well-remembered step following her along the gravel path.

"You don't mean to say that you are going to start?" said Bryanstone. "Why, it's utter madness for you to do so. Silly though you stole away, we saw you from the dining-room, and Sir Harry sent me after you at once to say that he would not allow you to leave his house. Before another quarter of an hour the storm will have burst."

Miss Bertram had foreseen no storm: she had watched other portents too eagerly to note those of the sky. But at Bryanstone's words she looked up at the clouds at once, and, like all the children of the moors, was too much used to every sign of weather not to see that his prognostication was true. Dense and low-lying though the black clouds were, a lurid brightness made every minute object upon the warren vividly distinct. The air was silent with a deathlike silence. The sheep and cattle from the moors had already gathered in uneasy crowds, under the shelter of the garden walls.

"Master seen it were a-coming, master did," said Mr. Pearce, oracularly; "and my missus and me, we seen it too."

"And so came for Miss Bertram at the exact time when she would have it at its height," said Bryanstone. "A very pretty piece of consideration."

The remark was wholly lost upon Mr. Pearce, who, in

common with most of the people of the district, regarded everything that occurred as inevitable—himself as a machine, and the dictum of persons above himself, as immutable decrees of Providence, against which it was not his place to rebel. The parson had ordered him to come for Miss Bertram at such an hour. Sir Harry, a higher authority still, ordered Miss Bertram to remain at The Place. These were the facts Mr. Pearce's mind grasped; and with the perfect natural breeding you so often see among the old and untaught poor, he moved away a few steps from the door, and turned his face up to the sky with an expression innocent alike of opinion on any subject, or consciousness of any person's presence, while Nelly discussed with Bryanstone as to the possibility of her return.

A sudden lightning flash, followed by a prolonged but still distant peal of thunder, brought her doubts to a close. It would have been worse than folly to set off for a two-mile walk across a perfectly shelterless common, at such a time, when she had the choice of shelter close to her hand, even though she should have to watch Miss Forrester's flirtations, and look at "Finden's Beauties" till midnight.

"There's a fate in all these things, you know, Miss Nelly," Bryanstone remarked, as they turned towards the house, followed cheerfully by Mr. Pearce, who, fatalistic though he might be in other matters, had doubtless individual ideas of his own respecting the cold meat and ale of the servants' hall. "A fate in these things. Who can tell what results may be destined to spring from such a seemingly trifling thing as a thunder-storm keeping you here to-night?"

A fate. How often did these words of poor Bryanstone's come back upon Nelly's mind hereafter? A fate, a bitter fate indeed was bound up in all that took place that night. At the time, however, his speech, and the cheerful tone it was spoken in, made her courage rally. If Mr. Bryanstone was really going to continue friendly with her, what mattered supercilious young ladies, and stiff hostess, and superbly condescending Miss Forrester? Superciliousness, condescension, "Finden's Beauties," neglect—could she not gladly bear it all?

Honoria was much too thorough a woman of the world not to pay attention to any passing fancy of the man she meant to win. When Nelly re-entered the drawing-room on Bryanstone's arm, Miss Forrester came forward at once to meet her. She was really glad, and both face and voice were real, that

Miss Bertram had not ventured out on such an evening. Of course Miss Bertram was going to remain all night at Lowick Place? That was right. She must share her room, then. A little thing like Nelly would be frightened to death if she found herself alone during a thunder-storm, in one of the great blue, or green, or yellow chambers of The Place. After which affectionate remarks, she took the girl off to her own room at once, to make her toilet for the ball.

Now, Miss Bertram's toilet consisted, naturally, of the plain muslin frock she had worn all day; but Miss Forrester made the most of it by lending her a sash and bracelet of her own, and arranging one or two natural flowers in her hair. In doing this Honoria was simply following her impulses. Everything about her, to a certain extent, was *en grand*. She could have ordered a rival or twenty rivals to be put to death—if it had been in her power—without a scruple; but she would have helped each one of them to dress herself to the best for her execution. Honour, as you and I understand it, she had none; but she had an instinct, commoner in men than in women, which withheld her from ever taking a certain class of small and dirty advantages. Dozens, scores of women, I have known, who hadn't it in them to approach within leagues of a perilous vice. I never knew one so thoroughly generous in all such small matters as allowing her adversaries choice of weapons, or of ground, as Honoria Forrester.

A waltz began to play as the two young women entered the drawing-room, and Bryanstone came up at once and asked Nelly to dance with him. "I have given up dancing years ago, in London," he remarked; "but in the country, and with a lady of your size, Miss Nelly, I feel I could figure away all night." At the same moment Mr. Stretton invited Miss Forrester to be his partner.

"For a waltz?" was her answer, looking steadily in his face. "Mr. Stretton, I did not know you danced fast dances."

"I have learnt a good many things of late," he replied. "We used to have very gay balls in Melbourne, I can assure you."

Melbourne! What had Mr. Stretton, who had just returned from Rio, to do with Melbourne? The contradiction struck Nelly Bertram in a second; and it, or some other thought, seemed to flash across Miss Forrester too, for she

flushed up suddenly, and put her hand without speaking within his arm. Bryanstone stood still and watched them as they went off. Mr. Stretton did not dance ridiculously badly; but a large woman, however graceful, can never look to advantage as she waltzes with a short and thick-set man of such a build as his.

"I hope our performance will be rather better than that," he whispered to Nelly, after watching them right round the room. "You ought to dance well, Miss Bertram. I can generally tell, by a woman's hands and feet, whether she can dance or not."

Nelly Bertram did dance well. It was her solitary accomplishment. Mr. Bertram, who despised most feminine graces, had a fixed opinion as to dancing being good for the development of muscle, and so from the time Nelly was quite a little child, she had been sent to join the dancing class at their nearest market town. When the dance was over, Bryanstone led her out into the verandah that opened from the ball-room, and began to pay her compliments; outrageous compliments, such as men of his age do pay plainish little girls of hers. She danced like a sylph, did she know that? Would she promise him five more round dances immediately? If she would not he would leave the ball-room at once, and not come near it any more. The flowers she wore in her hair were beautiful, and beautifully arranged——

"Arranged by Miss Forrester," Nelly interrupted him sharply, for his fine speeches were not pleasing her to-night as they had done before. Now that she saw him with other women, she knew that he treated her like a child. She would rather have had no complimentary words from his lips. "My flowers were arranged for me by Miss Forrester. You recognise her touch, no doubt, and that is why you admire them."

They were standing at the far and dimly-lighted end of the verandah, and, while she was speaking, it occurred to Bryanstone to take hold of her hand as it lay upon his arm. Don't men often do so, half in play, half in love-making, to a little girl they have never looked upon in the light of a woman? "Miss Forrester!" he repeated, in the low caressing voice that thrilled through every fibre of Nelly Bertram's frame. "What in the world should I know or care of Miss Forrester, and why should you be jealous of her, Nelly?"

The rustle of a silk dress made them both start round; and there, close beside them, were Miss Forrester and Mr. Stretton. It was next to impossible that they could have avoided hearing Bryanstone's last remark; they must have seen that his companion's hand was in his; and conscience-stricken and horribly ashamed, Nelly Bertram stood silent, waiting for the enemy to speak. Even Bryanstone, for one moment, was not thoroughly at his ease. At all events he changed his position in great haste, and began, with unnecessary interest, to descant upon the appearance of the night.

"Yes, the storm is holding off still," said Miss Forrester, in her quiet steady way. "But I am certain we shall have it to-night, nevertheless. I never feel as I do now except when a thunder-storm is near."

"How is that?" Bryanstone asked.

"Electric, Mr. Bryanstone. Look at me."

He looked at her until the colour burned on her face.

"Miss Forrester, are you engaged for the next dance?"

"The next? yes. After that comes a quadrille; will you have it? No? Well, then, the next. The third from this, a waltz."

"Thank you."

She walked away with Mr. Stretton, who, either because he had dined, or from some other influence, was quieter and more obedient than he had been in the morning, and again Bryanstone stood and silently looked after them. Contempt, aversion, were upon his face, Nelly thought; but with them was blent another expression she had not seen there a quarter of an hour before in the ball-room. Not love, not admiration, not jealousy; but yet something nearly akin to all three—the feeling that it was in Miss Forrester's power to elicit at will from men's hearts, even the best or the most love-proof among them all.

They stood there without speaking for five minutes or more, watching the figures pass and repass before the windows of the ball-room; then the music struck up for another dance, and Bryanstone recollected Nelly's existence. "That's the best galop that was ever written," he said in his usual kind way. "Come in, and dance it with me."

"Thank you very much, sir," Nelly answered, as steadily

as her choked-down tears would let her, "but I don't think I care much to dance again."

And then she danced it with him. What would Nelly not have done that he had asked her? Then she sat by him while they danced the quadrille that followed; and then—then the hateful notes of the expected waltz began, and he left her and went to Miss Forrester's side.

Her dancing was a dream. On the stage it might have been nothing; but among ball-room dancers it was pre-eminently good. As she glided before Nelly Bertram with her blonde head almost resting on Bryanstone's shoulder, her eyes upturned, with what she would herself have termed her "electric" look, to his face, the poor little girl felt how irresistible such a woman must be if she chose; how five minutes with Miss Forrester in his arms must undo all the progress her own plain face had slowly won for her up till now in Bryanstone's regard. Moral worth, mental fitness,—what weight would these have in the scale when added to her poor commonplace face and figure, and set against beauty of such a type as that?

"She waltzes well, no doubt of it," said a man's voice close to her ear. "And she's a monstrous fine-looking woman when she's dressed. There's no denying of that."

Miss Bertram turned; and to her exceeding disgust, found Mr. Stretton seated at her side. "Miss Forrester is a very good waltzer, and so's her partner," he proceeded, his former observation having called forth no answer. "Don't you think so, Miss?"

"Mr. Bryanstone dances well," answered Nelly, forcedly. "Of Miss Forrester's dancing I have not seen sufficient to be able to form an opinion."

"What? You're a stranger in these parts, then, eh? Don't know if that's been going on long or not?" And he glanced with a special meaning towards Bryanstone and Miss Forrester as they again passed before them. "One or two here tell me they think it has rather a serious appearance, and begad! I think so too. It would be a good thing for both parties. My friend, Miss Forrester, has youth and beauty on her side. Mr. Bryanstone, I hear, has money and the prospect of a title?"

The tone of his last words was hesitating; Miss Bertram



felt that he meant to question her, and answered curtly, "Yes."

"Mr. Bryanstone has money?" he persevered; "you know it?"

"I have heard so."

"And a title in prospect?"

"He is heir to a baronetcy, if you mean that."

"Miss Forrester told you this?"

"I never heard Mr. Bryanstone's name from Miss Forrester's lips. I scarcely know Miss Forrester." And Nelly drew herself up and gave him a look which she intended to express pretty clearly, "nor do I wish to know Miss Forrester's friends."

Mr. Stretton was not in the least affected by her treatment of him. On the contrary, what she said appeared to have afforded him satisfaction, for he sat cheerfully drumming upon his knees with his fingers, and watching Miss Forrester's movements with a sort of satisfied air that irritated his companion inexpressibly, as long as the dance lasted. When it was over, he went and stationed himself by the window which opened on to the verandah, and as they passed out Nelly saw, though Bryanstone did not, that Stretton whispered a word into Honoria Forrester's ear.

She gave him a quiet affirmative glance for answer, then went out into the open air with her partner; and Nelly Bertram, during a space of time that seemed to her an eternity, had to sit alone and con over her first bitter lesson on the subject of men's infidelity. It was quite late in the evening before Bryanstone even remembered those five round dances that he had implored her to give him.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## ON THE LEADS.

MISS FORRESTER'S bedroom was one of the few modern rooms that Lowick Place possessed. The ball-room on the ground-floor, and a billiard-room and two or three sleeping apartments over it, had been thrown out from the main building by Sir Harry on his marriage; and one of these apartments was Miss Forrester's. A dressing-room, in which a temporary bed had been made up for Nelly, led from it, and the windows, both of the sleeping and the dressing-room, opened out upon the top of the ball-room verandah. This verandah had a sloping leaded roof; but as an ornamental iron balustrade ran round the lower ledge, it would have been by no means an impossible, nor indeed a perilous, undertaking for a man to make his way along the roof from the billiard-room window to Miss Forrester's—a distance, perhaps, of twenty or thirty feet.

Glancing out upon the night, Nelly, to whom the locality was of course familiar, made some remark of the kind, simply to introduce subjects unconnected with Bryanstone and with her own unhappiness, to Miss Forrester.

"Nonsense! what should put such things into your head?" cried Honoria, sharply. She was standing gazing, fixedly, critically, not with vanity, but with a sort of hard business-air, at the reflection of her own handsome person in the glass. "What should any one want to break his neck crawling about on the sloping roof of a wet verandah for?"

"I merely said such a communication would be possible," answered Nelly; "why, I climbed myself along more difficult places than that once when the plumbers were mending the parsonage roof."

Miss Forrester just shrugged her shoulders, as if the subject were really too childish to interest her, and then asked Nelly carelessly to come and unfasten her bracelet for her. "The storm still keeps off; but we shall have it in earnest before long," she remarked, drawing down the window-blind somewhat hurriedly. "There, did you not see the first flash of lightning already?"

"The second," answered Nelly. "It was in the first flash, some minutes ago, that I made my observation about your window being an easy one to scale. At the same time," she added, "so vivid was the flash, that I distinctly saw the figure of a man standing and looking out at the night at the open windows of the billiard-room."

Miss Forrester's colour faded, a very unusual symptom of emotion in her. "One of the servants, no doubt. Old Sir Harry is so frightfully fussy about every bolt and key being seen to before they go to bed."

Nelly Bertram said nothing. She did not think the figure she had seen was that of a servant; and a vague feeling, not of actual suspicion, yet of vague, indistinct doubt, began to dawn upon her mind. What should any of the visitors be doing at that hour of the night, alone and without a light, in a position so isolated from all the rest of the house as the billiard-room?

"Mr. Stretton sleeps in this wing, perhaps," she suggested, "and that accounts for the apparition. My opinion is that it was Mr. Stretton I saw."

Miss Forrester turned her head away, and begged Miss Bertram for heaven's sake not to make her nervous by saying these horrible things! It would kill her to see the apparition of a face such as Stretton's at this hour of the night. Odious little wretch! All she hoped was that he would take himself off betimes next day. Nothing bored her so frightfully as friends of the family turning up in unexpected places and demanding to be recognised. Asking her to waltz, too! Horror of horrors! Did she look very ridiculous dancing with him? Yes, she needn't ask. She was quite sure she did—and she had seen plainly enough that Mr. Bryanstone and Nelly were laughing at her.

"He may have laughed at Mr. Stretton. I am sure Mr. Bryanstone never laughed at you," Nelly exclaimed, involuntarily.

In Miss Bertram's tone there was something either of bitterness or disappointment, or both, that roused Honoria's attention. She turned away from the contemplation of herself to which she had returned, and looked hard in her companion's face.

"Did you enjoy the dance to-night?" she asked, when she had examined her features sufficiently.

"Not in the least," Nelly answered: "with the exception of the first dance."

It was a perfectly candid reply; but in a certain limited sense these two women were candid with each other from first to last. Each understood enough of her antagonist's character, and of her own, to dare discard all the host of unnecessary falsehoods with which women of weaker calibre encumber themselves in battle.

"The first waltz? You danced it with Mr. Bryanstone. Yes, he does waltz well, but I find him out of practice. He and I are old friends, you must know. I knew him all this season, and slightly during the last."

"So he told me."

"When?"

"Last night, as I walked with him after dusk in my uncle's garden."

Miss Forrester's mouth relaxed as Nelly answered her in this frank fashion. It gave her positive pleasure to think that, for once, she had met a woman who would shake hands first, and then stand up and fight fairly till one or the other should fall.

"After sunset in a garden. That sounds romantic. Miss Bertram, I wonder sometimes what the sensation is of being, as you are now, an unpractised country girl leading the monotonous life of a country village."

"And I, Miss Forrester, would like to be able to taste for once the flavour of such a life as yours! To be plain, to be neglected, is a position in which I think even your imagination may easily place you. It is beyond me to picture the happiness of being beautiful. Of knowing that, good or worthless, faithful or false, one's own face can encompass whatever prize one desires to win!"

It was a sore thought. With Bryanstone's voice, with Bryanstone's eyes as she had last seen them dwelling on

Honoria, fresh upon her recollection, Nelly Bertram went away to her own room and undressed, and before she got into her bed tried to pray, poor child, that she might walk, at least with upright steps, along the up-hill stony path that she had newly got to feel her life would be.

When she had been quiet about five minutes Miss Forrester came in. She had not begun to undress; and now that the flush had left her, Nelly saw that there was a disquieted, weary look upon her face.

"Would you like a light?" she asked, not without kindness. "I have them at hand, and will light you one, if you think you'll be afraid of the storm."

Miss Bertram answered that nothing of the kind terrified her. She was not accustomed to a light, and should sleep better without it. "And I am thoroughly wearied out," she added. "Storm or no storm, I shall sleep well to-night."

"No doubt," said Miss Forrester, as she turned slightly aside from her companion's eyes. "When should one sleep well if it is not at your age? For myself, I must confess, a thunderstorm does upset me. You see I have not begun to undress yet. If—if—" she positively hesitated—"I find myself getting bad, by-and-by, don't be frightened if I make a rush into your room! Once or twice in my life I have done such a thing as scream."

But Nelly was really worn out; tired in body as in spirit; and whatever of strangeness there was in Miss Forester's remark, it never struck her then as it afterwards did when she looked back upon all the occurrences of that night. "Come in or scream, just as you like, Miss Forrester; I shall neither be frightened by the storm nor by you."

"And if I did scream," she said quickly, and coming close up to Nelly's side,— "if I did scream and you heard me, and knew I was fool enough to be lying on the floor, convulsed with senseless terror, how should you act?"

"Come to you, I suppose," was Nelly's answer, "and empty your water-jug upon your face. My uncle says that is the best thing for women's hysterics."

Honoria laughed, shook her hand, and left her. "You would act quite right," she remarked. "All I wanted was to prepare you for any possible scene. If I scream, come to me."

And then, not quite consistently, she locked the door which separated the rooms; and Nelly was alone.

But worn out and miserable though she was, forgetfulness refused to come to her. When Miss Forrester left she felt as though two or three minutes only would be needed for her to fall into the deep unbroken sleep which, till now, it had always been her portion to enjoy as soon as her head was fairly laid upon her pillow. But it was not to be so. The longer she remained quiet the more alive became thought, the more vivid memory, the more remorselessly clear reason. "Your dream is over—over!" repeated the last stern voice. "You have made up a lie for your own worship, and now you know of what material your idol was fashioned. Henceforth, reality again. The daily task, the monotonous, tasteless duty. Love and life and pleasure are for such as Miss Forrester. For you—oblivion!"

The girl had loved Bryanstone just as dearly as it was in her childish heart to love; and her pillow grew wet with tears as she lay there and communed with her own heart thus. Of the storm, which at every moment increased in violence, she remembered nothing; of Honoria Forrester, nothing. Jealousy was for the future. What concerned her now was simply her own bitter pain; not the means by which she felt herself to have been so cruelly, so newly robbed.

About an hour, or perhaps more, after Miss Forrester had left her, Nelly's heart suddenly beat thick at the sound of a hand stealthily laid upon the handle of the door. A moment later Miss Forrester glided to her side. Instinct—there was time for no process of reasoning whatsoever—prompted Nelly in a second to feign sleep. As her visitor leant over her, moving the candle slowly up and down before her closed eyelids, and so near to her that the girl could distinctly feel her breath upon her cheek, the thought crossed Nelly that Miss Forrester was not unused to this kind of investigation. The abrupt, noiseless entry: the cool, close examination of her face certainly bespoke no novice or unpractised hand; and the thought nerved her into acting her own part with like address. Miss Forrester had not stolen in upon her thus for nothing. Whatever her motives, whatever the game she was playing, Nelly felt she would at least meet her with weapons as like her own as she could command.

She scrutinised her face closely (a pale, wan little face it was); she laid her hand upon the pillow—doubtless to feel if it was wet with the tears of which Miss Bertram's cheek bore witness—then stood for three or four minutes at least by the girl's bedside. Do you suppose that Honoria felt the faintest approximation to pity as she stood there watching that white and tear-stained face? Not the very faintest: no more of pity than of triumph. Weakness of that kind had simply no place in Honoria Forrester's nature. She knew all about Nelly's little attachment for Bryanstone as well as if she had told it her in words; saw now that the girl, young as she was, could suffer in silence, and resolved to utilize her. Resolved! Was she not utilizing her already?

With the same noiseless step as she had entered, Miss Forrester left the room, and again quietly locked the door that separated her from her companion. Nelly Bertram's sense of hearing was constitutionally acute. It was sharpened tenfold now, both by the already over-excited condition of her brain, and by a sense of she knew not what vague danger that menaced Bryanstone in Miss Forrester's actions. She sat up in her bed, held her hair back with her hands, that she might listen more intently, and, after two or three minutes' silence, distinctly heard a sound, which turned all former doubt into tangible and dark suspicion. Miss Forrester was opening her window-shutter. Where were her terrors of lightning? Where was her fear of seeing that figure upon the balcony, which she had declared Nelly's words had made her feel? In the dead of night, alone, and isolated from protection, she was deliberately withdrawing the barrier that shielded her, and letting the light from her candle stream forth, like a signal, into the outer darkness.

A signal it evidently was. Miss Forrester's shutters were scarcely opened before a light appeared for an instant, then was extinguished, at the window of the billiard-room. Nelly Bertram had got out of her bed now, and with her heart beating as fast as though she were guilty, was stealthily looking out through the window, which, from the dressing-room being built in an angle of the house, commanded a full view of Miss Forrester's. In another minute a sudden flash of lightning disclosed to her the figure of a man, making his way, in the crouched attitude that the difficulty of the position exacted, along the verandah roof.

One sickening, one revolting suspicion came across Miss Bertram, and then her heart seemed to stop. She felt that she could have borne anything—any disappointment, any misery—death itself—but not shame like this for Bryanstone's sake! The blood rushed up into her head. Her limbs trembled till she was fain to clutch at the window-sill for support. Should she stop, should she go, should she call to Miss Forrester that she was ill, and so at least spare them all—them and herself—from further discovery? Just as she began to think that this indeed was the nearest course to honour left open to her, a flash of lightning longer and more vivid than the last, broke, as it seemed, directly above the house. And this time she saw the man's figure, distinct and clear, as though it had been broad day. It was not—not what she had feared. This midnight visitant was no other than Mr. Stretton, after all; and he was already within a couple of yards of Honoria Forrester's window.

Her first feeling—would you have it otherwise?—was she not human?—Nelly Bertram's first feeling was one of intense delight. What mattered Mr. Stretton? What mattered Miss Forrester's honour or dishonour to her? If she had known that the man was coming at Miss Forrester's instigation to put an end to her, and that they would just walk up to her bed, as one of them already had done, and Stretton murder her, while his companion looked on, with approving pitiless eyes, Nelly felt that she could have been thankful still. This was her first feeling. In another moment all the practical exigencies of her position rose clear before her mind. Miss Forrester was playing a double part with Bryanstone; no doubt at all of that. She was encouraging his intentions as eagerly as a woman could encourage the attentions of any man: and here alone, at midnight, was receiving the clandestine visit of a stranger? Should she return to her bed? Should she give Miss Forrester notice that she was watching? Should she remain silent at her post of observation?

Almost before Nelly Bertram could ask herself these questions, Miss Forrester's voice, subdued almost to a whisper, but still distinct enough for her to hear every word she uttered, fell upon her ear. With the first word the girl's attention was riveted; the abstract question as to her right of listening forgotten. Is it not so in all the great crises of our lives?



We can decide beforehand—we can decide in retrospect what would be right and honourable for us to do. At the moment of action something beyond ourselves—the fall of a leaf, the sound of a footstep, the mention of a name, what you will—is more than enough to turn the balance (always that way inclined) from the side of reason to passion.

Miss Forrester had mentioned Bryanstone.

Nelly Bertram would have risked discovery—would have braved the imputation of dishonour—to hear what this man and this woman, alone together in the dead of night, could have to say of him.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## FROM TEN TILL MIDNIGHT.

"Yes; he seems fool enough for anything," said Anthony Stretton, coarsely, in answer to Honoria's first whispered remark—"fool enough even to believe you. But that's no reason I should stop out in such d—— weather as this, to talk about him. It's very well for you, you know; but I'm drenched to the skin already." And as he spoke he laid his hand upon the ledge of the open window, and made an unmistakable gesture of entering the room.

I have remarked more than once that Miss Forrester's hand was white, but strong, and thick-set as the hand of a man. She used it on occasion as unscrupulously as other women use their tongues. A blow not so much passionate as deadly—a blow well-aimed, well-timed, straight out from the shoulder—came like a flash of lightning right across Mr. Stretton's face, and for a moment made him not alone relax his hold upon the window-sill, but stagger back slightly on his feet. Nelly wondered afterwards if she meant more than mere self-defence by that blow. The place where the man stood was an insecure one. The fall, if he had once lost his footing, would have been one of fifteen or twenty feet, into a paved courtyard below.

A curse, that there is no need to record, broke from his lips—a curse, followed by no measured threats of vengeance, if she dared to exasperate him.

"Then keep your place, please," said Miss Forrester, in her calm deliberate voice. "I've let you come here to talk about business, and also, I suppose, because I'm going to be fool enough to give you money again. But I'm not going to have my room contaminated by your entering it, you know."

"Oh, you're not, arn't you?" he answered, mimicking—only that his voice trembled with rage—her quiet indifferent tone. "Well, now, I should say myself you've been a good deal more 'contaminated' than that a precious number of times in your life, Miss Forrester. Eh?"

"Unless you can speak of what you came here for I shall shut my window," was her reply. "I neither wish to catch cold, nor to hear anything more than is absolutely necessary from your lips."

"Don't you indeed?"

"No."

"And suppose I say that you shall hear just as much and just as little as I choose." The light from her candle fell upon his face at this moment, and Miss Bertram saw that it was a ghastly face—a face drawn and livid with passion. "Suppose I say that I've had enough of this play-acting, and that I mean to turn over a new leaf—speak the word that'll ruin you, and make you return to your own position? You understand me, Miss Forrester. Do you think you'd take the trouble to listen to me then?"

"Tell me how much money will buy you off this time, and go!" was her answer. "I shan't stand here much longer."

"Nita!" he cried, fiercely. "Shall I tell you what it's uppermost in my mind to do?"

She never answered him.

"It's uppermost in my mind to come into your room, and stay there—stay there, you hear me, till morning—and then, before the whole lot of your great friends, make an end to all this — tomfoolery, as I ought to have done years and years ago, but for your lying promises. Curse you!"

"Oh, this is uppermost in your mind," said Miss Forrester, and her voice had not the very faintest tremor in it. "Well, I must say you have not increased in sense, my poor Tony, since I saw you last. May I ask what you would gain by the amiable little step you have such an inclination to take?"

"I should gain your ruin," answered the man, quickly. "Ain't I ruined, body and mind—ay, and soul too, if there is such a thing? Ain't I obliged to skulk my life away like a dog? Ain't I, that used to have the best of everything,

brought so low I often haven't the money to stake among my friends? And you, that brought me to it, you live like a lady and flaunt in silks and satins, and treat me worse than a dog—strike me, as you did a minute ago. By the Lord! I've had enough of it all—I've had enough of it." And he swung himself suddenly up, and seated himself, with his arms resolutely folded, upon Miss Forrester's window-ledge.

Honorina never moved by one inch. She stood, her face quite close to his, unblenching and unfaltering. Nelly Bertram admired her so. Strong though she was for a woman, her bodily strength was that of a child compared to her companion's. She knew not even of the feeble protection of another woman's presence. She was utterly, irrevocably in the power of superior brute force; and her face was just as calm, perhaps more so, than it had been three hours' ago, when, leaning on this man's arm, she followed Nelly and Bryanstone from the ball-room.

"The plan you spoke of this evening is not a bad one for you," she remarked, after a moment's silence; "and for so great a good as getting you out of the country, I am willing to make something of a sacrifice. If you will have done with theatre (it never had any effect on me, you may remember; I know how to act a little myself)—if you will have done with theatre, and talk sense, I'll tell you how much money I will give you, and on what conditions."

He shifted about uneasily, and did not answer. Then he exclaimed, "Why didn't you speak like this at first, Nita? I'd done nothing to injure you; and the first moment you found yourself alone with me, after all these years, what did you do? Strike me like a dog!" And his voice trembled, not alone from rage.

Honorina looked beautiful as she stood there, her white neck and arms shining in the flickering light, her scarlet parted lips not a yard from his.

"Why I struck you? It wasn't a blow, though; it wouldn't have hurt a fly. My poor Tony, you really need that I should tell you? Well, I struck you, as you call it, for two reasons. First, because I did not choose that you should enter my room. Secondly, because I thought it well to remind you of what am. You have seen me to-day as Miss Honorina Forrester—

Miss Honoria Forrester, dancing and flirting and intriguing, just like any well-born young woman of them all. If I had given you a soft reception, you might have thought my nature had really altered into one like theirs. It has not, Anthony; I'm as dangerous as I ever was, and, in my own way, I walk as straight. Do you remember that twenty-sixth of September at Homburg? Well, I've the scar upon my temple still, and the same kind of pluck that made me laugh aloud when I got it, in my heart. We can change our positions, but not our natures, you know, can we?"

"You are very handsome, Nita," he said, looking slowly up and down her face.

"So Mr. Bryanstone seems to think. What next?"

"And the greatest devil, I do believe, that God ever let walk upon the face of the earth."

She laughed; quite a cheery, well-pleased laugh.

I've seen women of every sort in my time, and most of 'em bad—most of 'em bad," he repeated, emphatically. "I've seen them that would sit looking sweet in a man's face, and putting their arm round his neck, at the very moment when they are selling him to the police, or to his dearest friend! I've seen them that have got to be fine-kept ladies, and would pass their old father and mother starving in the street with a laugh. I've seen them that made a profession of their badness, and them that made it their pride; and once—but that was at the diggin's—I saw a woman leave her two children to starve, and run off with the man who'd murdered their father over-night. But strike me blind," he exclaimed, fiercely, "if you ain't worse than all! Worse? you ain't fit to be named in the same day with them! Some of those I speak of were led astray by vanity, and some by taking fancies for fellows, and some by money, and some by drink. But still there was *something*—something of flesh and blood in them all. And you——" He stopped for very want of breath.

"I, Tony," said Miss Forrester, calmly, "am swayed by none of these influences. You are perfectly right—except, perhaps, as regards money; and for that alone I should not care: it must bring rank and position along with it. Who is to blame, please? My parents for bequeathing me my cool nature, or I for inheriting it? I never pretended to goodness, I

never pretended to feeling. I have certain views for myself. I am clever. Whatever stands between me and my ambition I will remove; of whatever can administer to it I will avail myself. Beyond this, it seems to me I am as good as other people. I am living in the great world now, you must remember, my poor Tony, among men of honour, among women of virtue, and I know all the little, daily, familiar practices of honour and of virtue well. I have no doubt there is a difference between me and these people. There must be, of course, when you think how bad I am; but for the life of me I never can make out where it lies! Having one great work on my hands, I haven't as much time, perhaps, for common paltry vices as most women of the world have. In heart we are the same—always with an immense balance of ability upon my side."

A child confessing before her first communion could scarce have looked more innocent than did Miss Forrester, as she stood with her white arms folded, her face calmly turned to her companion's gaze. For a moment Nelly Bertram was shaken in her bad opinion of her rival. Any human being who thus quietly and dispassionately proclaims his moral impotence disarms you temporarily; and this for a simple cause. It is in the vacillation; in the admixture, however small, of good; in the crushing, in the denying of good; that the majority of minds are accustomed to form their ideal of evil.

"Ability!" echoed her companion; but the passion was gone out of his voice now. "Yes, you have ability, and much good you have done by it! Do you remember what I was when I first saw you, Nita?"

"Well, never very bright at the best of times," she answered, "but well-meaning. I am willing to believe that you were well-meaning, Tony."

"I was the respectable son of a respectable father, as you know. I believed in a God and in a devil——"

"Anthony, don't be sectarian," interrupted Honoria, biting her lips not to laugh.

"And followed the business I was brought up to, and never wronged any man until I knew you. That's what I was. Look at me now."

"I do look. I've been looking at you a good deal, and at

this moment I see that you are drenched to the skin, and I feel myself that I am catching cold. Let us be sensible, Tony. As I said at first, where's the good of you and me doing the theatre? You want to be bought off again, on condition that you return to Australia—or America, is it? Name your price."

He swung himself down again to the verandah, and stood silent for several minutes with his back towards Miss Forrester. Then he turned abruptly and said, in a tone of dogged resolution, "A hundred and fifty pounds. I'll not take a penny less."

"Then your wetting has been for nothing," remarked Miss Forrester, laying her hand on the window. "I told you this morning that fifty pounds was more than I have to spare, and I repeat it now. Good night; and do your worst. I have long made up my plans ready for the time when you, or some other of the cads I was once mixed up with, shall betray me, and you may be sure you will not be a gainer when they are fully carried out."

He swore, threatened, hesitated, and finally they compromised, Miss Forrester agreeing, through some mutual agent in London, to take a second-class passage for him to New York, and pay, in addition, the sum of one hundred pounds into his hands the morning he sailed.

"For the rest," she added, lightly, "if anything worth telling should happen to me, I will write to your old address in London. If I fail—but I don't think I shall fail—I will be silent."

"And—and—" the man faltered, visibly overcome by no slight emotion, "you are determined to do—what you told me to-day you would do? If this white-handed gentleman—curse him!—should come to the point, you mean"—the words came from him with a hard, unnatural sort of laugh—"to marry him?"

"I mean to marry Henry Bryanstone," replied Miss Forrester, deliberately. "He's had a fancy for me, off and on, for the last six months, and I believe would have proposed this season, but for some silly scandal or another that some of his friends were good enough to get up about me when they saw he was serious. However, I think I may say I have him now. He said something to-night, which from a man of his kind

almost amounts to a proposal. Yes, I shall marry him. What a day it will be for me! There isn't a word of exaggeration in what I told you to-day, heirship to the baronetcy, thousands a year, and all. It's every bit of it true. Fortune is evidently smiling on us both, Anthony! With the money I'm going to give you you'll be able to start in quite a respectable way out there—marry a settler's daughter, perhaps, and lead the good, honest, religious, upright life that you always tell me you were meant for."

She had overshot her mark. Passionless herself, Honoria not unfrequently did so from her utter forgetfulness of the existence of passion in others.

"You think even when you're married I'll stop quietly away from you, do you?" cried Stretton; and as he spoke he grasped her arm and caught her towards him, with the short compressed violence of sullen rage. "*I* marry? *I* live a life of honest work? And you flaunt your riches and rank as a lady, and spare me a crumb or two, when it suits your purpose, from my lord's table! With all your ability, you're a cursed bad judge in some things, Nita, a cursed bad judge! I leave you now. I'll take your paltry bid, and go away, and leave you free to carry out your plans. You see the move as far as it goes, and you know that the chances are in your favour. I'm a bad subject at all times, and I may get fever again, and this time die of it, or be enlisted for a soldier, or return to the diggin's and get knocked on the head. If I do, so much the better for you, and you'll have won what you staked for. But don't you think," his tone sinking into a hoarse whisper, "that you'll ever have done with me till I die! For you wont. I'm open and above-board with you. If you were to marry this fellow, Bryanstone, and paid me yearly more than you'll ever give me while you live, it wouldn't keep me away: no money would. I know the flesh and blood I'm made of too well. Some fine morning, the old damnation madness, the old damnation jealousy, would wake up, and I should take my passage in the next English ship that left port. Remember this! And remember, I never deceived you about it!"

"You hurt my wrist, Anthony," said Miss Forrester, gently. "Let it go, please." He did so, mechanically. "And, if you are willing to profit by a piece of friendly advice, listen



to what I'm going to say to you. When I am married to Bryanstone, don't you ever come back! There's no good in my telling you any falsehoods whatever. The money you get from me now is the last you shall ever touch, and unless you are very tired indeed of your life, you'll not come back again. I wish you dead now. When I am married I shall wish it more than ever. Keep out of my way. You'll be safer so."

He looked her steadily in the face: then he said, slowly, and with emphasis, "Nita, if you could murder me at this minute, without fear or possibility of being found out, would you?"

"Of course I would. You know it without asking the question. The more reason for you to keep out of my way when I'm married, as I told you."

"And for that very reason, and because I know you wish me dead, and would help me out of your way if you could, I'll come back," he answered, doggedly; "I am not going to stop here in the rain, or waste many more words upon you; but before I go I say this. Whether you marry or don't marry, whether you live in England or abroad, remember one thing—as long as I live I shall come back, in whatever place, and at whatever time I choose. I'll do nothing low. I'll not come suddenly and disgrace you without warning. You shall always have due notice—twenty-four hours, say—of my coming. As long as we keep on terms, I'll not obtrude on you by daylight, before your husband or your friends. But whenever you get a letter containing—what shall I say?—well, the time of night you carried on with him just now will do—a letter containing these words, 'from ten till midnight,' written in my hand, you'll know that I am near, and that any night between those hours, you may expect to see me. Nita, good-bye."

He held his hand out, but she never took it. I believe she never saw that it was offered. She was livid; her teeth were fast clenched; her eyes half closed, and fixed with the stealthy look of a tiger's upon her companion's face.

"Anthony!" she exclaimed, after a minute or so, and in a voice singularly unlike her usual one. "I am not given to sentiment, as you know; but at this moment I have a presentiment that I can't get over. Don't come near me when I'm married."

"I shall come near you when, and where, and as often as I choose."

"You are determined?"

"I am; so help me, God!"

"And, so help me, God! you'll repent it if you do."

She held out her hand to him this time, and he took it, held it irresolutely a minute in his, and then caught it to his lips, and kissed it passionately.

And as Nelly stood for a moment and watched him, after Miss Forrester had shut the window, and he remained standing there alone in the darkness, she felt—child though she was—by how much the man was the better of these two. For the man had passions still.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## A LOVE-LETTER AND A LOVER.

WHEN Honoria awoke the next morning, a feeling, such as she had scarcely ever experienced in her life before, overcame her; the feeling of severe bodily illness. Her eyes felt hot and heavy in her head; her mouth was parched; her limbs trembled under her, when she stood up and tried to dress. She went into the dressing-room Nelly had occupied, and found it empty; then rang the bell, and was informed by the maid who answered it, that Miss Bertram had returned home before seven o'clock that morning.

And Mr. Stretton?

Mr. Stretton had gone too. A letter he got by post obliged him to start for London at once. And here was a note he had directed to be given to Miss Forrester.

Miss Forrester took it without the slightest show of anxiety; then looked at her watch, and sent a message to Miss Surtees, asking to be excused from appearing at breakfast. "If you will bring me a cup of tea, that is all I shall want," she added, in answer to the girl's inquiring glances at her white face. "I am a little tired, and shall be quite well when I am dressed, and can get in the air."

But she felt convinced that she was not going to be well. She had known nothing of illness herself; but she had seen enough of the first fever symptoms in others to be sure of what these trembling knees, these heavy eyes, these burning hands portended.

Great heavens! if she were to be struck down now: at the very hour when all her future life was at stake; when everything was to be done by her own strength, her own pluck, her own cool command of nerve and of brain! She was without physical fear. No thought of death or sickness softened her, either for herself or others. It was the mis-

fortune of being ill at this particular time that overcame her; and with a desperate moral effort she said to herself, after the servant had gone away, "I will *not* be ill yet. For a day, at least, I will keep up and see him, and say what I have to say. It can't come on; no fever ever comes on in an hour. I remember Rose before her brain fever, and she was dull and hot, like this, all one day, and then delirious at night. I don't care what I am at night if I can keep up, and see Bryanstone once more to-day. Who knows? He'll see my illness, at least, isn't acted, and it may move him. I wont rouge, I think," she went on, looking at her haggard self in the glass. "He shall see me in all my ghastliness, and then if I am taken worse, and brought here by the women, they shan't be able to say I paint, at all events."

She opened Stretton's note: a formal announcement of his departure, that all the world might have read; then got a sheet of note-paper, and wrote a few lines in pencil, asking Bryanstone to be in Miss Surtees's morning-room at eleven, as she had a question on business to ask him. This she put into an envelope, and committed to the charge of the servant who brought her tea, with the request that she would contrive to meet Mr. Bryanstone on his way from the breakfast-table, and give it, unseen, into his own hands. A risk, certainly; but like all intriguants, imperial or otherwise, Honoria Forrester continually found herself with no other choice than that of trusting some one; and, as a rule, she knew the chances were in favour of her not being betrayed. Bestow confidence unasked on any human being, kaiser or housemaid, and in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred you wont find yourself sold; provided, of course, that the person you trust has no selfish interest either way in the matter.

The girl faithfully gave the note to Bryanstone as he was on his way to the stables, and at eleven o'clock punctually, he entered the little study where Miss Forrester had given him the appointment, and where already she was waiting for him.

At sight of her he positively started. She was more than pale, she was ashen, save where one scarlet spot burned on her left cheek; and her dress—a white morning wrapper, unrelieved by any admixture of colour—heightened, as she intended it should do, the death-like hue of her complexion.

"I hope you'll forgive me for this," she cried, rising for an instant, then sinking back on the sofa where she was seated. "But I've some important business to do to-day, and feel so ill I hardly know how to get through it. Will you help me with your advice?"

Of course he would; and of course he came and seated himself by her side. Tears, that soften so many men, made Bryanstone turn to adamant; but the desperate pallor of this woman's face did touch him acutely. He had never been alone with her since that fatal night at Laura Hamilton's door, and it began to dawn upon him that he was behaving badly. If he didn't mean to marry her, there was certainly no necessity for him to behave to her like a brute. She loved him, it was pretty certain; or what did that feverish hand, that face of marble portend? For how could he guess that she had stood drenched to the skin in her thin ball-dress at midnight, and that the first ague-chill of fever was upon her?

"I will do any kind of business you ask me, Miss Forrester, but first I should like to do something for your health. Do you know that you are looking fearfully ill to-day?"

"Oh, not worse than I have often done lately," she answered, with a trembling attempt at a smile. "I get quite flushed and well by night. It's the beginning of each day that is such cruel, hard work for me. However, that's not what I asked you here to speak about." She interrupted herself, hurriedly. "Mr. Bryanstone, I want you to tell me the safest way of paying over money to—to—why should I hesitate? to an unhappy man without honesty or principle, whom I want to get out of the country. I will be plainer still—to the man you saw last night, Mr. Stretton."

"Mr. Stretton!" repeated Bryanstone. "The man who you said was——"

"I know, I know," Honoria interrupted. "What would you have me say? I never meant to deceive you, but before all those people what could I do but try to explain away his appearance? He is of good family; he is a man of education. In that I told no positive untruth. But, oh, Mr. Bryanstone, when I tell you that that man is my own first cousin; that that man was the means of breaking my poor father's heart; can't you imagine all I felt at seeing him unex-

pectedly yesterday?—all the old suffering, all the old shame.”

She broke down for a minute or two; then finding that Bryanstone remained undemonstrative, rallied her nerves, and without heroics laid before him a short sketch of Stretton's career. A rapid, succinct sketch, really marvellously life-like, and well put together, when you consider that there was not one syllable of truth in it from beginning to end. Also that it was only by supreme effort that she could bring her already fast-turning brain to concentrate its thoughts at all.

Bryanstone heard her throughout; heard how, as a forlorn orphan child, Stretton had been received under the roof of his uncle, Honoria's father. How, when he was put out into the world, he sunk from one misdeed to another, until at length he made away with some money intrusted to him by an employer, and broke the old man's heart. How Honoria, never ceasing to look on the cousin and companion of her childhood with affection, had even out of her scanty means as a governess, contributed to his support. Finally, how, now returning from Australia, whither his relations had subscribed to send him, he had tracked her, and followed her into Norfolk.

“And once more I have promised to help him,” she finished. “He says that a hundred pounds will set him up in America, and I have promised to lend it—I might just as well say to give it—him, and also to pay his passage to New York. The conditions I made were, that he should leave England in two days, and only receive the money when his passage is taken; and what I want to ask is this—how must I get my money out of the funds, and can I depend on an agent to pay it to him at the last moment? He is to sail from Liverpool on the 15th.”

It was a master-stroke in every way. Of course, now that she had told him so much of her painful history, Bryanstone's lips were sealed from making inquiries of any kind. How could he doubt the truth of a story which was reduced to such plain business details as the proposed payment of money through a Liverpool agent? When she began he had dreaded hysterics. Her concise narrative of facts, her simple offer of one hundred pounds out of her own slender fortune, disarmed him of his last suspicions regarding her.

“If you will tell me Mr. Stretton's Christian name, and

the name of the vessel he is to sail in, I will undertake it all for you. As to talking of selling money out of the funds, there is neither time nor occasion for it. For the time being I am your banker."

A thrill of joy shot through Honoria's heart. A man who once becomes a woman's banker, under whatever circumstances, is, to a certain extent, compromised.

"I thought you would do it for me," she faltered, "and I don't know how to thank you enough for your kindness. But as to lending me the money, I—I—" here she cast her eyes down, and turned away from him—"I don't know how Mr. Lumley would like it." She clenched her hands together nervously.

"Hang Lumley!" cried Bryanstone, hotly. "I beg your pardon a thousand times, Miss Forrester; but what has Lumley got to do with my helping you in your business, and taking as much trouble as possible out of your hands?"

"I am afraid Mr. Lumley has something to do in every concern or business of mine," she answered; "or, at all events, that he thinks so."

"Oh, I was not aware of it. I thought," said Bryanstone, with the coldness of ice, "that the last time I saw you, you said all that was at an end. Doubtless you have quite forgotten the time I allude to, Miss Forrester—the night before I went abroad with De Bassompierre? I beg your pardon for recalling it."

"I have not forgotten it, Mr. Bryanstone. But it was a moment of madness, as you know."

He was silent, and she looked suddenly, piteously into his face. "It was a moment of madness. You know it; do you not?"

"Madness or not," said Bryanstone, quickly, "I know that it was a moment worth a good many years of ordinary life! Miss Forrester, do you wish me to say more?" And as he spoke her eyes sank under his gaze; and ill though she was, the blood leapt up crimson into her face.

"No—no—" she stammered, almost in a whisper. "I don't wish you to say more. You have spoken to me once already like this, and I can't—I dare not listen to you. I belong to Farnham Lumley, Mr. Bryanstone! I know it. I feel it. When I wake, every morning, that horrible knowledge sickens me from the very thought of having to

live out another day. He has done everything for me. He befriended me, loaded me with gifts, introduced me to the world in an honourable position, and now—great God! now I am utterly in his power, and he knows it. Read this.”

She drew forth a letter from her pocket, and as she gave it to him her hand lightly touched Bryanstone's. It had been burning a minute before; now it was ice-cold, and clammy, like the hand of a corpse. “Read this,” she repeated, “and tell me how I can dream of escape—how I can for a moment listen to words of kindness, of pity even, from you.”

The letter was signed “Farnham Lumley,” and ran thus :

“MY DEAR HONORIA,—I have just heard that you are going with the Haighs, to stay with the Surtees, in Norfolk. Are you aware that Bryanstone is now there? If not, mind, I inform you of it, and I also positively forbid you, if you have not already started, from putting yourself in any position where you are likely to meet him. As I have often told you, I believe in none of your charming sex. I don't believe in you; and I will not have men couple your name again with his, as they did after that confounded supper-party, when you made such open love to him under my very eyes. You seem to forget, I think, from the tone of your last letter, the position in which we stand to each other. When I met you after Bryanstone's sister had kicked you into the streets, I took a fancy to you, and brought you forward, and made a lady of you, remember; and you're not going to turn round now with any of your cursed ingratitude, and talk about your ‘wretched spirits,’ and ‘not feeling sure of your own heart,’ and such bosh! Your heart, if you have one, I don't care for; but *you* I most definitely mean to have. A word of mine, if I chose, would be enough to make the friends I have given you cast you off. For at whose recommendation but mine did they first take you up?—at whose recommendation have you been living among the best people in England, ever since you left Mrs. Hamilton? And if you show any signs of being false to your promise, that word shall be spoken. I have behaved honourably to you from the first. You took my presents. You made me get you on in London under the express understanding that I should marry you when my wife dies, and I mean to hold you to it. I saw her doctor the day before yesterday, and he told me nothing but



a miracle can prolong her life till winter. Write to me at once—a warmer letter than the last—and believe me, my dear Honoria, your fond, but not your foolish, slave,

“FARNHAM LUMLEY.”

“It’s a nice love-letter, Mr. Bryanstone,” said Honoria bitterly, as he finished it; “and I am right, am I not? Mr. Lumley has me safe. After all he has done, I could not give him up now.”

“You could do all you chose, Miss Forrester,” answered Bryanstone, as he put the letter back into her passive hand. “The brutal cruelty of such a letter as this tells you pretty clearly the kind of happiness you’ll have to look forward to as Farnham Lumley’s wife.”

“I know it. I know it only too well!” she cried, with a stifled sob. But what is my alternative? If I don’t marry him what will people think of me, as he says? It is different for girls in your rank of life, Mr. Bryanstone. My character is my bread, and I must—yes, I must be true to this man. Whatever his faults are, he offers me protection and a home. If—if—I had never known you, I believe I might have been happy with him.”

She rose and staggered a step or two forwards, then rested her arm heavily on the table, and looked back to him.

“Will you—support—me a moment?” she gasped. “I am faint.”

And then the hue of death indeed gained over her face. Her head dropped, and in another moment Bryanstone held her, fainting and speechless, in his arms.

Nature had done for her that in which all art would have failed. He knew that this was no acting; that these livid lips for once did not lie; that no deception lay beneath the grasp of those clammy rigid hands. And tenderly as any man must feel towards any helpless woman who loves him, he held her and looked into her face.

At this moment the library-door opened, and Miss Surtees, closely followed by the Haighs, mother and daughter, entered the room. Miss Surtees’ stony face demanded a dozen explanations on the spot; and all Bryanstone’s chivalrous nature was aroused for Honoria’s sake.

“You have come opportunely, Miss Surtees,” he said, look-

ing quietly into her outraged face. "Miss Forrester, as you see, is fainting, and requires air."

Then, as Miss Surtees swept by him to the open window, he added, in a lower tone, "I ought to tell you how it is you find me in such a position, only that this is not a moment to enter into explanations."

In the very valley of death though Honoria already was, her brain noted and registered those words. Bryanstone was won!

They succeeded after a long time in rallying her from her swoon; but when they had done so she could not stand. Before night the doctor from the nearest town pronounced Miss Forrester to be sickening with typhus, and all the visitors, mortally afraid of contagion, were already preparing to leave The Place. By morning of the next day she was delirious.

## CHAPTER XIX.

## THE TURNING POINT OF MORE LIVES THAN ONE.

"From ten till midnight—from ten till midnight."

Would the parched lips never give over the reiteration of those four words? Nelly Bertram looked at her as she lay there, tossing and moaning in her delirium—looked at her, the one thing on earth that the girl believed to stand between her and what she desired; and to her own heart she said, "Let her die! It is well so. What good is there in her life? Let her die, and Bryanstone will return to his first faith—to the faith that was never shaken till her fatal beauty stepped between us, and led him away from me. Let her die! These things are in God's hands."

"From ten till midnight—from ten till midnight. Why did you ever come back?—why did you ever come back? There, take the money, and stay away. 'Tis a far place, Australia—a far place—and none there knows you or me. What, come back?—come back so soon? I gave you all I had; you know it—all I had—and—water, water! My mouth is on fire. Why do you all rise up against me so? Stretton—Bernardin—St. Georges. From ten till midnight—from ten till midnight!"

Miss Bertram gave her water, smoothed her pillow, held cold wet cloths upon her burning head; then, when Honoria Forrester had comparatively calmed, had sunk, not into sleep, but into a state less wildly feverish than she had known for days past, she stole away to the open window, and the broad western light having now faded, drew aside the curtain, and sat down to cool her own jaded senses with the soft purity of the evening air.

She needed calm, she needed purity, she needed refreshment. Any wearied attendant in a sick-room must need them physically; but Miss Bertram knew—knew with what bitter

self-loathing!—that she needed them for her brain, for her heart. Few human creatures at seventeen know so much of themselves as not to be shocked when circumstances chance abruptly to reveal to them their own capabilities. It is later in life that no revelation of our own hearts can ever, by possibility, surprise us; and Nelly's life, as yet, had been an exceptionally quiet and honest one. Till four weeks ago, she had simply never known a human passion stronger than the common tempers and gluttonies of childhood. Having never been tempted by what, to her, was temptation, she had never fallen; and now, great Heavens! what a tumult of evil had been stirring in her breast during all this foregone day! She knew that she had wished the helpless woman whom she was tending to die; had watched her with cruel eyes as she lay there, fever-struck, fearfully lovely in her unconscious, graceful beauty; had listened greedily to every word her parched mouth let fall; had sworn to herself that if the patient lived she would make the utmost of whatever clue to her past life her own unwitting lips had afforded,—would use them, as she felt they *could* be used, to withhold Honoria from the man who had been won away by that false fair face from herself.

And now Nelly looked out upon the night—the golden summer night—with one or two great stars already risen above the woods, and with the faint odours from the corn-fields stealing in and mingling with the sweets of garden flowers; and she remembered how short a time it was since she used to play among the corn-fields of a summer's evening, and how good her life had been then, and how miserable it was now that she was a woman, and had learnt to love and to hate! And then the childish heart welled over, and Nelly bowed her face down in her hands, and wept—the first tears that she had shed since Miss Forrester's illness.

No woman of five-and-twenty would have done this. She might have cried, of course, from want of sleep, or from the mere bodily necessity of periodical tear-shedding which exists in many persons; but having once felt all that Nelly had done that day, she would not have been softened into remorse by the first sight of the evening star or the smell of a few flowers coming in through the open window. Youth, youth only, is the season of abrupt transitions, of unexpected revulsions of feeling (because in youth 'tis all feeling that sways

us, not reason—which of course is a much slower, though more meritorious process). And Nelly was very young; and hatred, and love, and all mere raw materials of life and of passion were abundant within her. And so the purity and the beauty of the night cried out to her aloud: the fierce impulses of five minutes before became suddenly as scarlet sins in her sight, and she wept.

A few minutes later, Bryanstone's voice called to her softly from beneath the window to go and walk with him awhile in the garden; and finding the patient still quietly at rest, Miss Bertram gave her over to the charge of one of the women-servants, who, now that the danger was lessening, began occasionally to come near the sick-room, and stole quietly down the staircase of the silent, deserted house to meet him.

It was the fairest hour of the twenty-four. The garish light of day had faded newly from the heavens, and while all the silence, all the voluptuousness, of night was upon the earth, night herself was still afar. Bees hummed still among the closing garden-flowers: no moon was out as yet upon the sunless sky.

"Day is gone, like my hope; but night, like my despair, hovers around, felt, but as yet unseen," thought poor little Nelly, sentimentally, as she stood a moment at the open hall-door and looked out upon that fair and peaceful evening. And then she went out, with her miserable weight of misery, into the golden, delicious air, and passively took Bryanstone's arm—for he was waiting kindly for her just outside—and had to reply, as best she might, to his comments on her whitened cheeks and heavy eyes, and evident need of rest.

He chose the path to the spot which, since she was a child, Nelly had liked best in all the grounds of Lowick Place. A walk at the south side of the fruit-garden, hid away by an avenue of sycamores from sight of the house, and with only a sunk holly fence dividing it in front from a wide-spreading vista of corn-fields and an horizon of blue moor beyond.

Nature was as remorseless as ever, Nelly felt. The yellow fields lay just as calm in their shorn beauty, the far horizon faded into heaven with just as soft a kiss as though Mr. Bryanstone had been going to confess his love for her; as though Honoria Forrester was not in the world. No discord in sound, no discord in colour in all that fair expanse. The

earth, in the rich fulness of her autumn beauty, satisfied, crowned with plenteousness, at rest; and only one foolish human heart rebelling against the untimely storm that had laid its summer low! Nothing more.

"This cool air will do you good, Nelly," said Bryanstone; "but you really look too tired for much walking. Let me find a place for you to rest." And he took her to a low stone-bench at one end of the walk, spread out the rug that he had thoughtfully brought with him for her use, then took his own place beside her, and extended an arm for her support.

"I don't want holding," remarked Nelly, drawing herself petulantly away. "I am neither tired nor ill, whatever I may look."

Bryanstone took his arm away in a moment.

"Nelly," he said, after a minute or two, "shall I tell you what I think of you?"

She looked at him, passionate tears ready to start into her eyes.

"I think you the noblest little girl living. It will do me good, it will make me think better of all women for the future, having known you."

She answered that he must have had a very poor experience of women hitherto if anything in her character could strike him as so excellent.

"I've had a very uniform set of experiences," said Bryanstone, gravely. "My mother was a woman of the world. My sister is a woman of the world. The different women I've thought myself in love with have been women of the world. Save one exception, of which it doesn't matter to speak, I never knew anyone in the least fresh or honest till I met you. Years ago I remember seeing a great artist," he went on with a half-smile, for indeed he considered himself now, as at all times, to be addressing a child in Nelly, "do the kind of character beautifully in the *Sonnambula*, but you are the only little country girl I ever knew anything about off the stage. Nelly, how happy you'll make some one when grown up to be a woman! Probably, I sha'n't even know the name of your husband; but some day, five or six years hence, and when I am leading—God knows what sort of life! it will come upon me like an actual pleasure to think Nelly Bertram is a woman now, and is making

some man happier than I am. I shall think that, not exactly with envy, but with a kind of jealousy nevertheless, Miss Nelly!"

And Bryanstone took her cold hand in his own, and pressed it kindly.

"I don't ever mean to marry at all," said Nelly, snatching her hand away from him. "I wish nothing except that I had never been born, or that I could die now. What good is my life to anyone?"

"What good is anyone's life?" answered Bryanstone. "Mine, I can answer for it, has never been of the slightest use to anyone—myself included—from the day I first entered upon its possession till now."

"Your life is what you choose to make it!" cried Nelly, impetuously. "You are in love with Miss Forrester, sir, as you perfectly well know, and you are going to marry her!"

"Miss Forrester is much more near death than marriage just at present," said Bryanstone, but he turned his face away a little; "and even if things were as you say, Miss Nelly, I don't see that it would make my life of any particular worth."

A woman of the world would have known instantly that Bryanstone was free still. But Nelly heard, believed, reasoned through her fears alone. "Your life will be what you choose to make it. It won't have been spoilt and made null for you by the hand of another person." Then her voice choked.

Bryanstone looked at the girl suddenly; and felt to her as he had certainly not felt before till this moment. She was not pretty, but in the trembling twilight, and with her eyes, half tears, half fire, turned full to his, Bryanstone was sensible of a charm in Nelly Bertram such as he never remembered having discerned in any other woman—no, not even in the soft pink-and-white face of his first dead love. Miss Forrester's attractions could be plainly labelled; red lips, fine bust, sleepy eyes; the trained *allures* of a finished coquette of five-and-twenty; and every woman he had pretended to himself to love of late years had owed their influence, such as it was, over him to the same kind of means alone. His first love had been a dream, a hunger of the imagination, a young man's fancy embodying itself in the

first simple girl he chanced to meet. Of gaining a woman's mind, and heart, and soul he really knew nothing (how many women do you meet who possess mind, and heart, and soul?); and the troubled, passionate look of Nelly Bertram's eyes smote him strangely.

"Nelly, do you think you'll care a bit about me when I go away?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

She was silent.

"If Miss Forrester recovers—when she recovers, rather, and when she and I and all of us are well apart, do you think you'll remember me a little sometimes? Nelly, child, if things had been ordered differently—I mean if you were a grown-up woman and I had met you sooner—how differently the lives of all of us might have turned out!"

And, whether she willed it or not, Bryanstone came nearer, and half put his arm round Nelly's waist.

It was a moment of fierce temptation to her: the fiercer because she had been brought up to recognise so very few of our conventional codes of honour. She believed thoroughly that he was engaged to marry Miss Forrester; and yet, instinctively, she felt that at this moment it might be possible for her, poor and plain and charmless as she was, to step in and divide them. She felt that this was the moment, if ever, in which Bryanstone could be won. Without actually having reasoned it out, she knew that his love for Honoria Forrester was not an adamant love. A breath of what she had witnessed, a breath of that midnight interview, of the words which in Miss Forrester's delirium had never ceased to pour from her lips, and Bryanstone, in all human probability, would stand free of the entanglement. He might have received as truth whatever garbled accounts of her relations towards Stretton, Miss Forrester had thought fit to give him. But what man's fiercest misgivings would not be roused by such details as it was in her own power to give—above all, by the allusions to himself which Miss Forrester and her companion had so freely made? All this came like lightning across Nelly's mind: and Bryanstone's arm was around her, Bryanstone's breath upon her cheek! And she had been brought up with no more exalted or more complex moral code than such humdrum bits of morality as her copy-book texts or Mrs. Trimmer's Scripture questions afforded—neither of which authorities, you may be sure,



even if she had thought of them, would have saved her more than any trite authorities ever can save any of us on occasion.

But the sole safeguard against real, not conventional, dishonour—the regal gift of a generous nature—was Nelly's. She loved Bryanstone to excess. She loved life. She loved herself. She bled for her own pain. But one word against the rival who lay, helpless and fever-struck, and in her power, it was not in her to speak.

"I shall always remember you kindly, Mr. Bryanstone. Always—always—and would do anything for you, or—for her, if you marry her. Only don't ask me to stay here much longer, please. Miss Forrester is better. Doctor Turner told me if she quieted towards night, he would have no fear of her by to-morrow. She is quiet—she is in a deep sleep now, and by to-morrow evening one of the servants can nurse her as well as I could. I don't want to say any more—but, somehow, I could not bear to be here as Honoria Forrester recovers."

She did not resent it this time when Bryanstone took her hand, and held and kept it. She took his arm and walked very calmly with him to the house. And only when she was alone by Miss Forrester's side did the thought come upon her fully that with her own right hand, of her own free-will, she had just closed and blotted what might have been the first and fairest page of her life!

Then the inexorable punishment of all human creatures who are at once liable to passion and to reason overcame her.

Had she been right? Was this indeed honour or Quixotism? Had she fulfilled her duty even to Bryanstone in withholding from him her knowledge?

And still while Nelly tortured herself with doubt, Honoria Forrester slept on the calm, refreshing sleep that was to restore her to health; bring her, as the forebodings of Miss Bertram's heart too truly prophesied, to Henry Bryanstone's arms.

CHAPTER XX.

"YOU HAVE COME AT LAST."

On the following morning Miss Forrester was pronounced out of danger: two days later her iron constitution was already fast bringing her on towards recovery.

"She rallies like a child, my dear sir," the pompous little doctor said, as he rubbed his hands, and announced the good news to Sir Harry. "A marvellous constitution—obeys treatment like an infant. Fear of a relapse? Not any, sir, not any. My patients seldom do relapse. At the end of a fortnight, if we go on as we do now, Miss Forrester will be in the air again."

"And I can go away at once," thought Miss Bertram, who was passively listening to the verdict. "No need of my nursing, no fear of her getting strong when she has Henry Bryanstone to recover for."

She went back into the sick-room, and found Miss Forrester for the first time since her illness disposed to talk.

"Have I been ill long, Miss Bertram? Mr. Turner said something about 'weeks' just now. Have I been ill all that time?"

"You have been ill exactly three weeks," answered Nelly. "Yesterday three weeks I came to The Place."

"And you have nursed me through it all?"

"I have. I heard the other women had gone away afraid, and, as you are a friend of Mr. Bryanstone's, I was glad to please him by looking after you. Don't thank me, please." And she crossed over the room, and, seating herself by the open window, leant out her tired, white face to the refreshing morning air.

"There is a genuine nature!" thought Honoria, looking after her. "None of your Lettys and Lauras! This

woman loves Bryanstone, and has nursed me for his sake, and tells me so. I swear I'll never injure her while I live, if I can possibly help it. Miss Bertram," aloud, "if you won't let me thank you, you must let me be grateful to you. I am very grateful. Would you mind answering a question I've got to ask?" she went on after a minute, and while Nelly continued cold and silent. "A question about myself, and no one else."

"If I can, I will answer it. Stay, I'll come closer to you. You're not strong enough to exert yourself by talking yet."

Miss Bertram came and sat in the chair where she had watched through so many an hour of fever and delirium, and then—but not without hesitation, the patient brought out her question. Had she been delirious? had she raved in her delirium? and what—here she faltered most—had been the things of which she had talked?

"I think you talked of everything under the sun," said Nelly, with a little bitter laugh. "Sometimes you were waiting for a bell to ring or a voice to call you. Sometimes you were crowned with flowers. Sometimes you were being hissed by a thousand voices at once—and whenever you talked like this it was in French. Then came German, of which I only knew enough to tell it was about cards, most of it. Then back to French; then English. Some one called Lumley, whoever that may be, and his letters and Mr. Bryanstone—and then Anthony Stretton. More about him than anyone else though, of course."

"Why 'of course,' Miss Bertram?"

"Because you know you saw him last before your illness, did you not?"

"O yes. I had forgotten. And what nonsense did I say of Anthony Stretton?" Miss Forrester tried to smile.

"You talked no nonsense at all. Even when you were wildest your words had sense in them. What you repeated oftenest concerning Mr. Stretton were his own words, 'from ten till midnight—from ten till midnight.' One day you said that, I should think, for two hours without intermission."

"How painful for you to listen to! But—but—what do you mean by saying they were his own words? Why, I don't even know what they mean."

Nelly was silent.

"Don't be afraid of speaking," said Honoria. "I shall have no relapse. I'm no fool to get agitated and throw myself back. What do you mean by saying 'from ten till midnight' were Mr. Stretton's own words?"

"Simply what I do say," answered the girl, curtly. "If you force me to speak I must speak. The night you opened your window to that man, and stood there drenched in the storm, I listened to you all the time. I thought you were plotting against Mr. Bryanstone, and I heard every word you said."

"And have repeated it to him since?"

"Miss Forrester! But you don't know what an offence your question is to me!" Nelly interrupted herself. "How should you know whether I am likely to do such a thing or not? No, I have told him nothing. I listened because I thought—I took it, without reason, into my head—that some injury was going to be done him. If there had, you would have seen whether I could speak or not. When I found what your intentions were, I resolved to be silent. I wouldn't have seen Mr. Bryanstone hurt; but he may marry whom he pleases. I will not injure you with him," cried the poor child, with trembling lips.

Miss Forrester was very nearly touched. The best precepts of morality, the holiest truths of religion, were powerless, at all times, to stir this pagan heart. But genuine, sudden outbreaks of nature like Nelly's (or, as you may remember, like the solitary little nurse-tender's about her sailor boy) did move her sometimes into a vague consciousness of that utter want in her own dead heart that made her what she was. This was love! This was honour! This was self-sacrifice! This was truth! All the things that the companionship of women of world, like Letty, had confirmed her in scoffing at.

"You like Mr. Bryanstone," she faltered almost without knowing what she said. "Miss Bertram, I am sorry—"

"Please don't pity me!" cried Nelly. "You have nothing to be sorry for. Mr. Bryanstone is perfectly free to marry any one he chooses. I am only a spectator of it all. What have plain women like me to do with love or marriage?"

"You speak of my engagement to him openly," said Honoria;

who naturally had only a vague idea of the extent to which Bryanstone had compromised himself. "Surely you have not mentioned it to any one yet?"

"I mentioned it to Mr. Bryanstone himself only an evening ago," Nelly answered, "and he did not deny it. Why should he? All the rest of the house knows it. Sir Harry told me the day I came that Mr. Bryanstone had said something of the kind to his daughter. Surely you, Miss Forrester, don't desire that it should be kept quiet."

"No, no," murmured Honoria. "I only wished to know if it was openly spoken about. I have somewhat lost my memory in my illness, I think."

And she leant back on her pillow, and mused long and silently over the strange chance that, as it seemed, had thrown victory into her hands. "Lumley's letter was cleverly planned," she thought. "I take every credit to myself for the idea" (for in this, as in everything else, Lumley had been but the copyist, the tool of the superior brain); "but it alone would not have succeeded. I remember it all now, and there was no more said of marriage than there was that night in the Haymarket, until I turned sick, and those women found me in his arms. Then what fine feeling made him speak, I wonder? In what miraculous manner did honour, as such men men call it, suddenly take its place upon the scene? That matters little. If what the girl says is true, I have won. Now my game must be to bring on all the rest quickly—to give no time for those women or the brother to interfere. If I know him he will be glad to be spared congratulations, and I—I will be generous, and forego settlements!"

But her first interview with Bryanstone showed Miss Forrester how entirely she was reckoning without her host in these fond speculations; how entirely Nelly had mistaken her own jealous misgivings for truths in speaking of the engagement as an acknowledged one.

Bryanstone had not taken refuge in flight, certainly, as ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have done: he had remained near her when all the other inmates of the house left her to the mercy of strangers in her hour of need. But his brain was just as cool; his intention of marrying her or any other woman just as distant as ever. And on the first day, when she was able to come downstairs—Nelly

had gone back to the Parsonage, and she and Bryanstone were alone—he let this fact be known, in terms impossible even for Miss Forrester to mistake.

"You must have found it very stupid here!" she remarked, looking up from the sofa where they had placed her—very weak and white she looked—by the open drawing-room window. "And I have a guilty feeling that you have undergone these three weeks' martyrdom on my account."

"It hasn't been martyrdom at all," said Bryanstone, in his frank way. "I spend a month of every year in this house, and have passed my time more pleasantly with old Sir Harry than I do generally, with the house full of men and women, who bore me. For the rest—well, I think, Miss Forrester, I ought to have a guilty feeling towards you. Do you remember—I daresay you don't, though—the day you were taken ill?"

"Yes;" and Honoria cast her eyes down; she "remembered that day well."

"Well, Miss Surtees came in at the very moment when you had fainted, and—and—" delicate manipulation of truth was not Bryanstone's forte—"seeing that she thought the position rather strong, I toned it down for her, you understand, with something about that not being the moment for explanations. If they come down upon you with congratulations some day, you will know what it all means, and give your own answer. You have refused me; jilted me; anything you like! Now are you very angry? I have told you the whole delinquency, openly."

"Angry? No," murmured Honoria; but her heart felt ready to burst with mortification; and the great tears rose sullenly in her eyes. "I am not likely to be put in the way of congratulations," she went on. "I had a letter from Miss Surtees this morning, telling me that 'as the doctor pronounced me convalescent, she had no doubt I shall be able to leave Lowick at once.' The house will want thorough purification," she added; "fresh papering and whitewashing, doubtless, before any of them can trust themselves back to the risk of contagion! I'm not very strong for travelling, but I suppose . . . I suppose I must go?" And she raised her handkerchief with a trembling hand, and passed it across her face.

Bryanstone expressed his opinion that she ought not to think of moving for another week at least; but he asked no question as to where she was going. Three weeks' musing in a lonely country house had quite restored him to his senses concerning Miss Forrester, and the desperate danger he had already so nearly run, on more than one occasion, in flirting with her.

"I am afraid I shall not see you for some time, Miss Forrester. I am going over to Norway next week, and later in the autumn Fairfax wants me to go down to Scotland with him."

"Do you think you will be in London in the winter, Mr. Bryanstone? As I have told you before, everything in my future life depends upon Mr. Lumley. When he is free I suppose I shall become his wife at once. God knows, I have no friends whose opinion I need consult!" she added, bitterly. "It is customary, doubtless, for a man to wait a twelvemonth after his wife's death before marrying again. But what does custom matter to me? Who is there to care whether I am praised or blamed in anything I do?"

Mr. Bryanstone walked away to the window, and began a steadfast inspection of the distant moor; hazy and aerial-tinted in the tremulous heat of the early September evening.

Miss Forrester looked at him with feelings in which positive hate was fast becoming preeminent.

"Gredin d'Anglais!" she muttered between her set teeth; thinking in French, as she always did when she was really moved. "And a day or two ago I almost was in love with him, and sentimentalized about that little white-faced fool who deceived him! If I don't marry you, I'll be revenged on you some other way; that at least I may swear!" Then, aloud: "But wherever I may meet you, Mr. Bryanstone, I hope we shall be friends. Perhaps I may see you again before you leave England. I must go myself to London for a day or two, I think."

Bryanstone answered that he should only be in town two nights. He had written yesterday to bid them have the house ready for him; but would not know whether he might go there till to-morrow morning. His housekeeper had strong opinions as to putting him in his proper place, and very likely would tell him to go to an hotel. "That is, if she's in London herself," he added. "My own conviction is that

they shut the house up, and go to the sea at this time of the year."

"And—and when do you leave this, then?" she asked, with quivering lips.

"To-morrow, Miss Forrester. I have really only waited on from day to day until I could say good-bye to you. To-morrow night I shall be in London."

The entrance of old Sir Harry here put an abrupt stop to the conversation, and at an early hour Miss Forrester rose up and wished them both good-night.

"Good-bye, rather," she said, as she gave her hand to Bryanstone. "I don't suppose I shall see you again."

"Well, I am afraid not," he answered; "I shall start, most likely, by the mail train at ten. Good-bye, Miss Forrester; when we meet next, I shall hope to see you perfectly strong again."

She gave no answer, save a deep, suppressed sigh, and as Bryanstone opened the door, and saw her walk feebly through the hall, it was without any feeling of exultation that he said to himself, "I am free." A woman never gains so much in a man's regard as when, without tears, without hysterical reproach of any kind, she accepts his rejection and lets him go!

Honorina Forrester knew this well; and when she turned, before leaving the hall, and looked at him, something in Bryanstone's softened face told her that her last move had been the right one. She stood a moment irresolute; then smiled, with a faint and trembling smile, and passed away quickly, as if to hide her agitation from his sight.

He left Lowick next morning, having received a gracious permission to make use for one night of his own house; and by five in the afternoon was philosophizing, not greatly out of spirits, upon the cheerful aspect of the London streets in September, and his chance of finding a solitary man in the whole broiling desert to eat a dinner and spend his evening with him.

By extraordinary chance the faces of three men he knew, passing, like himself, for a day through deserted Babylon, greeted him at Arthur's; and with an infatuation that could only be expected from men looking out at a London street with the thermometer at eighty-five, some one proposed after dinner that they should go round, as a matter of curiosity, and



see what was being done at the theatre. They sat out half of some popular adaptation of innocent bigamy, at the Adelphi; and then, at Bryanstone's suggestion, adjourned for a little hazard to Pratt's, where just as many men seemed to be crowded round the tables as though the season were at its full. Grilled bones and excessive champagne were the natural conclusion of a night spent, as one of them observed, after the manner of very juvenile ensigns come up from camp to see life; and the dim September morning was already breaking overhead when, with his pocket by no means heavier, and his head unequivocally lighter for the night's work, Henry Bryanstone found himself dismounting from a hansom before the door of his own house in Piccadilly.

He had paid and dismissed the cabman, and was wildly searching through all his pockets, as men at such times do search for their latch-keys, when an apparition—indeed it seemed to him two, if not three apparitions—of a woman's figure suddenly emerged from a cab that was standing four or five doors off, and glided through the uncertain light to his side. It—no, *she*—I will not appeal one instant to your sense of the supernatural—laid a hand, damp and cold as a tombstone, upon his, and looked up with a wan smile to his face.

"You are here, sir," she stammered, with lips that were blue and deathly after that long night's vigil. "You have come at last!"

"Honoria!" exclaimed Bryanstone, who could scarcely have been more aghast with surprise had a legitimate ghost laid its hand on his. "You here, at this hour?"

"I followed you up from the country, and called at your house, and they said you would most likely be back early, and so I kept the cab, and waited. I did not know what else to do, and I wanted to pay you back something I forgot in my illness—the money you paid Anthony Stretton. Here is a cheque for it, if you will please see whether I've written it right." And with her left hand she drew out a piece of paper from her dress, leaning heavily against the area-rails, as if to steady herself from falling, while she did so.

Bryanstone put the paper, mechanically, in his pocket, without looking at it; and then he took both of Miss Forrester's hands in his.

"Do you know that this will be your death?" he asked her. "Why, you're not fit to be out at all, and here you've

been—God knows how many hours in the night air! It's a cursed shame! Those women have not behaved humanly to you!" He was only half sober, as Honoria quickly saw. "And you shall come in with me, by G—! you shall, my poor child! To turn you out upon the cold streets this way!"

"No, no, Mr. Bryanstone!" she cried, shrinking away. "I'll go back now. I'll never trouble you again. It was the thought of your saying good-bye so coldly that made me miserable, and then I said to myself I *must* see your face once more, if I died for seeing it; and I got here as well as I could, and waited. And now I've seen you; and I'll go." In proof of which determination, she caught hold heavily of his arm and laid her ghastly white face against his shoulder.

Cabby, who was of course a spectator of the touching scene, advanced at this moment, and asked if he should ring the house up? He'd been there since nine o'clock, and in course the lady was chilly, which indeed he was himself, "although the night being 'ot——"

"Go to blazes!" interrupted Bryanstone, curtly. "We don't want you any more. What's your fare?"

"One pound twelve and six, sir, if you please. Two-and-six an hour till midnight, and double afterwards, and——"

Bryanstone tossed him a couple of sovereigns, about the last he had. The cabman, with the fine knowledge of human nature ordinarily possessed by cabmen, saw that it was a case in which the parties were too far gone to demand any change; and—after forming inductive theories of his own as to the probable success of the young woman's plan—drove away.

They were alone in the most utter solitude in the world—London at five o'clock of an autumn morning. Bryanstone, his head unsteady with wine, and feeling himself the protector, against a brutal world, of this deserted woman, who had risked her life, her honour, to see him. Honoria, chilled with agitation, undoubtedly, but not at all faint (she had eaten sandwiches and drunk cherry-brandy at intervals throughout the night), and with her brain as cool and collected as the Duke's on the morning of Waterloo.

"Come in," he said, having at length discovered his latch-key in the pocket where he always kept it, and opened the door. "What are you afraid of? There's no one here to say anything to you."

"And you'll promise never to think the worse of me for this afterwards?" she answered, crossing the threshold, and turning her beautiful white face back to him.

"Do you think me such a cad, that you need ask that?" was his reply. And, coming close to her side, he led her into his own little sanctum on the ground-floor, where the early light was already stealing through the closed blinds, and gazed at her in a sort of exultation.

Bryanstone was habitually a singularly sober man; and on the rare occasions when he drank too much, he drank a great deal too much. He had done so now.

"I start for Folkestone at nine," he remarked; "and you shall go too. I swear you shall. Oh, never mind your traps," as she made a feint at demurring, "you can get all you want when we're there."

"And—and—the ceremony?" she murmured; "it must be a special licence, which is *so* expensive, Mr. Lumley told me once."

"Curse Lumley! what do we want him for? Of course it must be a special, if you wish it—take us down to Folkestone in two hours, if you like."

Many a better man than poor Bryanstone has lost his senses in wine; and many a wiser one than Bryanstone at such times would see no material difference between a special train and a special licence, with a woman as beautiful and as clever as Honoria to confuse his ideas for him. That she had risked life and reputation to see him again; that he was bound in honour to be her protector against the world; these, lost though he was, were stronger feelings with him still than love, or even passion, for herself.

They were feelings far more sterling for her to work upon!

As his brain cleared, passion must have cooled; but as his brain cleared, the sense of honour to her became stronger.

Before noon of the day that was then dawning, Miss Forrester was Henry Bryanstone's wife.

## CHAPTER XXI.

## SUSPECTED.

It is a recognised axiom that early married happiness is a state not to be profaned by the pen of the novelist. Describe every detail of the courtship, count the orange-blossoms in the wreath; record, if of a Tupperian cast of mind, all the aspirations for the future that a well-regulated bride and bridegroom ought to breathe upon their wedding-day—then be silent, until a year and a day later you raise the veil, and disclose an infant heir smiling in his cradle, or a former husband hovering in dark disguise about the doomed couple's peace—according as the bent of your story may be domestic or sensational.

I only remember one English novel in which the author boldly followed his hero and heroine to the Isle of Wight, and described them, four days after marriage, consuming enormous quantities of hot rolls and prawns for breakfast; and many persons I know considered that novel to be the first sign of decadence, or Gallican tendency, in our national literature. Following a custom which we must accept as right, because it is a custom (although, to my mind, the honeymoon, not the wedding-service, is the climax of every story—the turning-point of every life), we will pass over the first four months of Henry Bryanstone's marriage.

These four months had changed the golden year into fog and rain—an English autumn into an English winter. They had also reconciled Letitia Fairfax not one whit to her brother's infatuated marriage, but to the fact that it was Christian, decent, worldly-wise for her to receive the bride. And in full family conclave it had at length been decided that Bryanstone, who had just returned to London from the continent, should be invited to introduce his wife at once to her new relations.

Letty and her husband, with one or two unimportant

cousins, were staying with old Sir Hyde Bryanstone, at the family place in Somersetshire, when the ultimatum was decreed.

"Better tell Henry to bring her down here at once," said Sir Hyde, "and I can act the *père noble* in a grand tableau of reconciliation among you all. If Henry is really married to her, as I am afraid there's no doubt," ["O, Uncle Hyde!" cries Letty,] "the best thing for you and Richard is to say 'amen' to the ceremony. As far as I am concerned, I'm perfectly indifferent on the subject," added the old man, maliciously. "If Henry would not have married, I must; and at my age it's only right I should be willing to concede the best privileges and blessings of life to the younger generation."

Old Sir Hyde was, or is—for why use the past tense in speaking of a man whose face is still to be seen any day you like during April and May at the window of Boodle's?—one of the few human beings of whom Letty stood thoroughly in awe. All women stood in awe of him. His manner to them was so irreproachably polished, his disbelief in them so profound, his memory respecting their actions so unerring! A grand inquisitor walking about among heretics, who knew their names to be written in the fatal book, could scarce have been treated with more flattering attention than was Sir Hyde Bryanstone, whenever he chose to show his imperturbable handsome old face in any London drawing-room. Women of all ages paid him court. He remembered domestic vicissitudes that occurred under the fourth George just as well as the scandal of yesterday. Young girls in their first season manœuvred and fought for old Sir Hyde's goodwill. A shrug of his shoulders was as damning to a new beauty as is a hiss from the *loge infernale* to a new prima donna. A word from him could commit a woman to old age who an hour before had had a dozen young men at her feet. The exactitude of his dates was what killed. He never said coarsely, "Such a woman is growing old;" but "In the spring of '56 such a woman first rouged." "At the Prussian ambassador's ball in '49 such another's teeth and hair first took the world by surprise." Nothing that he had once heard—and he heard everything—did he ever forget, or become confused about, either in public or in private life; indeed, in politics alone he was a kind of epitomized blue-book. In his recollection of faces he was like a prince of the blood. With one of his quick sidelong glances

he could identify the features of any man or woman he had ever seen, often of those he had only known by sight in the street, and after the lapse of any number of years. No one ever knew him at fault in any case of identity; and, unlike most *raconteurs*, no one ever remembered him to falsify, or even embellish.

"Sir Hyde Bryanstone does not deny it," was a sort of indorsement to any bill of attainder that might be issued for public circulation. "Sir Hyde Bryanstone says it is so," was tantamount to actual confiscation of whatever shred or remnant of reputation the unhappy attained might yet possess.

Some one has called society a strong solution of all the best books. Sir Hyde was a strong solution of all the best scandal of the last fifty years. As Professor Owen could solve a megatherium from a tooth, or Agassiz the picture of a fish from a scale, a single word, a name, a date, was sufficient for Sir Hyde to pronounce with certainty upon any man's antecedents or possibilities. Bland and courteous of manner; handsome, clever, rich: here was a man who seemed to have passed through life with no other object than that of becoming the unwritten record of every human frailty that he came across. It was his calling, simply. You had no more right to call him hard names for his lack of charity, than you would have in calling Field or Jonathan hard names for being good detectives. In a different grade of life he probably would have been a detective. With a taste for writing spiteful things, instead of saying them, he might have been the nineteenth century's Walpole. As it was, Sir Hyde Bryanstone was just a white-headed old country gentleman; enormously courted and feared by the world generally; without wife or child to trouble his peace; and as to friends—well, with an old name, an old estate, and three or four thousand a year to keep up the name and estate upon, I don't think any man, Christian or pagan, need go very far in search of these.

He had, as I said, neither wife nor child. "Most likely some woman jilted him in his youth," people commonly averred. But, failing any more than presumptive proofs of a love-scar, I should be inclined to think a man like Sir Hyde had never in fact felt the slightest inclination to marry. A horrible instinct of celibacy does run, like madness, in some families, (among the male branches only, of course), and the Bryanstones were not entirely free of the taint. Out of three bro-

thers, Henry Bryanstone's father alone had married. In the preceding generation there were records of two or more jovial old bachelors, brothers and cousins. And, as you have seen, Henry Bryanstone, save for one of the accidents to which all men are subject, would most probably have again carried out the family eccentricity.

Had he done so, the baronetcy and estate would, on his death, devolve upon a certain worthy person, named Augustus Bryanstone, who was in orders, consequently the father of many children; and an object of extreme distaste to old Sir Hyde. Much, therefore, as he disapproved of marriage theoretically, and idiotic as he considered Henry for not having sought a woman with money, the fact of his having married at all was on the whole welcome to him, rather than otherwise.

"If Henry chose to marry neither a lady nor an heiress," he remarked, in answer to one of poor Letty's fierce outbreaks against Honoria—"if your brother chose to look out neither for rank nor for fortune, he has perhaps done well in taking a foreigner who has no relations to feed upon him. As she was a governess, the young woman will probably know how to bear the neglect that certainly awaits her; and from Dick's account of her person—not yours, my dear—is likely to rear him a progeny of healthy and handsome children."

A huge consolation to Letty, who for years past had looked upon her own boys as the certain heirs to all that Henry Bryanstone had to leave.

With more pain than any untruth had ever cost her in her life, she embodied old Sir Hyde's invitation in a little note, expressive of her desire to stretch forth the hand of sisterhood to Honoria. The note was answered by the bride herself—was short, to the point, neither too stiff nor too affable, and accepting at once, for dear Henry and herself, the invitation to Brentwood. They would come down by the afternoon train, only a few hours, that is to say, after the arrival of the letter.

"But what a hand!" said Letty to her uncle, as, ready dressed for dinner, they were waiting the arrival of Bryanstone and his wife. "Should you have thought it possible a governess, of all people living, could write such a scrawl?"

And she took from her pocket and displayed a handwriting something between that of an English washerwoman and the

tracks made by a spider which has emerged from the ink-bottle.

"O, that is a thoroughly well-bred French hand," said Sir Hyde, who was unusually genial and pleasant. "They all write that way. Don't be censorious, Letty. I have made up my mind to fall in love with my niece the minute I see her."

Hearing which statement from the head of the house, all the unimportant cousins, male and female, at once made up their minds to fall in love with her too.

Richard Fairfax, who had been out shooting all day, was just coming up the steps before the entrance-door, his gun in his hand, as a carriage drove up the avenue with the expected guests. After a hasty shake of the hand, Honoria remarked that she must ask to be shown to her dressing-room at once, as they were already past their time; and the stately house-keeper having been summoned to attend upon Mr. Henry's bride, Bryanstone and his brother-in-law were left alone in the entrance-hall.

"Well, how are you, old fellow?" cried Richard, seizing Bryanstone's hand anew, and wringing it with all his might, as Englishmen do on the occasions when Frenchmen—horrible thought!—salute each other's hirsute faces. "Bearing up pretty well—eh? You know I haven't seen you since it happened."

"O, I'm all right," said Bryanstone, who was looking worn and bored. "What have you been doing all this time? Saint Alban's fluke at the Leger was rather a surprise for us all, wasn't it?"

Instead of answering, Richard Fairfax looked long and steadily into Bryanstone's face. "Henry," he exclaimed, after a minute, "there's no good in you and me treating each other as strangers at this time of day. I've got something deuced unpleasant to tell you. Will you hear it at once or not?"

"About some dishonoured bill of poor little Chetwynd's, I suppose?"

"No, no, no, man!" interrupted Richard, his boyish face looking ominously staid and long. "It's nothing about horses or bills at all."

"Then keep it till after dinner, Dick," said Bryanstone, quietly. "Don't look so distressed, my dear fellow. What-



ever it is, I shall doubtlessly bear it excellently well when I have drunk my usual quantum of Sir Hyde's Madeira; does the old gentleman expect one to dress elaborately? I suppose there is a heap of relations above-stairs, as usual?"

"The old gentleman not only expects us to dress elaborately, but on the present occasion will allow us just two minutes and a half to dress in," answered Richard, looking at his watch. "Letty and the accustomed cousins are on the tenter-hooks of anxiety, you may be sure, to see you and—and——"

"Mrs. Bryanstone," Bryanstone finished for him. "The word does not come quite natural to one yet, does it, Dick?" And then they parted, with more constraint of manner than there had ever been between them in their lives before, and went their way upstairs to their different rooms.

Mrs. Bryanstone waited, of course, until her husband came from his dressing-room; then, taking his arm, according to all bridal rule, swept down with him to the drawing-room. She was gorgeously got up in a dress of silvery sea-green silk, relieved by the softest lace; her ornaments of delicate Maltese silver, and with her hair marvellous (had she not travelled down in a forest of pins; bent upon utterly routing her adversaries from the first moment of attack?)

When the door opened Letty saw, with one glance of amazed sorrow, that this detestable woman was looking handsomer than ever. As for the country cousins, they positively started. Sir Hyde, courteously advancing, gave her face one rapid glance, *and remembered her* on the spot.

"How are you, sir?" said Bryanstone, shaking his hand. "My wife—Sir Hyde Bryanstone. We have not kept your dinner, I hope? That's right. Letty, little woman, how are you?"

Letitia rushed forward and shed tears—they were quite genuine ones, tears of vexation—on her brother's shoulder. "But he does not care for her!" she thought. "That is something. He wouldn't speak to me so kindly if he did." Then she turned, all the cousins looking on, and extended her hand to the bride. "Interloper, adventuress, betrayer of my brother's peace!" the gesture said, as plainly as a gesture can speak, "an outraged family acknowledges you as far as is necessary for its own honour, and for every other sake than your own!" And when she, further, deposited something

emblematic of a kiss upon Mrs. Bryanstone's cheek, a visible thrill went through the ring of cousins; one of whom, indeed, a female, lifted up her pocket-handkerchief and wept.

But old Sir Hyde's manner to the bride was charming. He made her complimentary little speeches as he handed her down to dinner. He talked to her, sometimes in English, sometimes in French, which language he spoke perfectly, during the whole meal. Of Paris, of Germany: of foreign manners, cooking, dress, theatres—of every conceivable subject in which a young woman like herself could be supposed to take an interest, did Sir Hyde Bryanstone discourse. Honoria felt more at her ease than she had done any time during the last two years of her life; instinctively knowing that her interlocutor did not wish to trip her up—as, indeed, he did not; he was too sure of his own memory to need confirmation—and chatted and laughed, quite undaunted by Letty's frigid, jealous face immediately opposite her at the table. The cousins all thought Mrs. Henry must be a very nice person indeed, as Sir Hyde took so much notice of her: and the meal that everybody had thought would be such an ordeal, passed off as charmingly as though none of the persons sitting round the table had been relations.

But when Bryanstone and Richard were left alone with Sir Hyde—for the male cousins were of an age to be sent away shortly after the ladies—the old man turned round, sharp, upon his nephew, and, without any softening preamble whatever, exclaimed, "How the devil did you pick up that woman, Henry?"

"Well, sir," answered Bryanstone, with a sort of short laugh, "I should think it would be more to the point, perhaps, if you were to inquire how the devil she picked me up?"

"Not at all," said Sir Hyde. "*That's* simple enough. When you were mad or drunk, which comes to the same thing. I've known such women do it scores and scores of times, and with wiser men than you. What I want to know is, how and where you picked her up? For, of course, I can't suppose that you don't know what she is?"

"Well, no," said Bryanstone, curtly; "certainly not. She is my wife."

"And what before?"

"Letty's governess for ten days. Old Mrs. Forsyth's companion for a year and a half."

"And before?"

"A pupil-teacher in an English school since she was a girl of fifteen."

"And you believe that last statement?"

"I have not taken the pains to disbelieve it."

"Henry, the woman you have married was, in the year eighteen hundred and fifty —, exactly eight years ago, a public dancer in Paris, and the name she went under was Nita. She came out at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint Martin, and for one season obtained extraordinary success, through her face and arms alone. The next winter they tried to bring her out at the Opera, and on the second night of her appearance the Parisians found out that she couldn't dance a step—they were dying to get back Rosati, and jealous of any new pretender to their favour—and hissed her off the stage. I was present myself. What she may have been doing since I don't know. At the time of her failure I recollect she started, as the Nadedja had done the year before, for St. Petersburg, and I heard of her a year or two afterwards as a small actress in Vienna."

"Are you sure of this? Will you swear to what you say?" cried Bryanstone, in an unnaturally quiet voice, but with a face the colour of stone. For in this minute of time every foregone unheeded scrap of evidence; Laura Hamilton's inquiries at Peckham; Tontin's recollections of Honoria at Vienna; a hundred vague and reasonless suspicions of his own, had started up with sudden damning clearness upon his memory. "Will you swear to the truth of what you state, sir?"

"Yes, certainly, I will swear to it," replied Sir Hyde, unhesitatingly. "Why, I was in one of the stage-boxes. I saw her face as plain as I do yours, at the moment they hissed her off, poor beggar; and besides, I knew her perfectly well by sight the winter before, like every one else in Paris. Take her there, if you want Nita the dancer to be identified. Hers is not a face to forget. I knew her the moment I saw her on your arm to-night," added old Sir Hyde, bitterly.

And then there was a dead silence. In the first shock of any great misfortune, I have remarked that the last thing men ever do is to talk. Bryanstone himself was the first to speak. "If it was any one but you, sir, I should say there *must* be an error in this. Why, putting everything else aside, she has shown me letters, papers, bills, that proved

her for years to have lived in that boarding-school at Peckham."

"And if she showed them to me, and if she took her oath to the fact of her having lived there, and if the owners of the school took their oaths to it too, I would believe none of them," said Sir Hyde, firmly. "Of course, you'll act as you choose now, as you did in marrying; but whatever you do, take my advice on this point—don't make the scandal public all at once."

"I should say don't make any scandal at all," cried Richard Fairfax, looking up for the first time from the walnuts he was pretending to peel. "You'll have other work on your hands without that; and after all, there are many women of the world as bad—I mean there are many actresses as good, and a deuced deal better than half the women of the world you meet! Why, think of all the actresses who have married from the English stage alone. The Countess of——, Lady ——,"

"Dick," interrupted Bryanstone, leaning forward, and putting his hand on his brother-in-law's shoulder, as he used to do in their troubles when they were little lads together, "if a man, with his eyes open, likes to marry a woman of any calling whatsoever, he is no true man unless he holds by his choice afterwards, so long as she carries out her compact with him. I married a woman who represented herself to be without money, without birth. So I took her; and so, if I prove her to be true, will I hold to her. If I find her account of herself false; if I find this accursed story of yours to be true, sir," and he turned to old Sir Hyde, "from that hour she leaves my side for ever. I'll have no scandal about it—don't fear! Léttý and the children shan't be injured by such a shame! She shall go quietly; well-pensioned, laying the full blame on me, if need be; but she shall go—I swear it! Now, the thing is for me to get to the end of it all quickly. I will be just—I will be just. She shall be allowed to speak for herself. She shall not be condemned unheard, whatever she is."

Old Sir Hyde rose, took snuff from the great gold box upon the mantelpiece; turned, sat down, and then looked straight again at his nephew.

"How did that woman marry you, Henry?" he asked, almost in a whisper. "Were you mad or drunk, which?"

"Sir," answered Bryanstone, "I was drunk. But drunk or sober, I should have married her just the same. I was in one of those positions in which a man has no choice left him."

"I understand—I have heard as much before. She made her way into your house; and to save her honour, you have surrendered your own."

"All that belongs to the past," interrupted Bryanstone, moodily. "We have nothing to do with it now."

"Of course we have not—of course we have not," said Sir Hyde; "we have only to do with it thus far. Is a woman who acted as Mrs. Bryanstone acted then, a woman to be trusted now? Assume that what I tell you is true, and that you accuse her of it openly. There may be accomplices—well, old associates, then, if you dislike the term—to be silenced; facts to be falsified; plots of which you can scarcely form a conception, to be formed. And mind, an adventuress, who has played for and won such a stake, wont be over-scrupulous as to the means by which she holds it. At all events, you play directly into her hands by letting her know what you are about. And if she is guilty, Henry, she deserves no quarter from you! Treat her with justice—let her have your protection before the world as long as she is suspected only. But keep your counsel to yourself. The means of proving whether I am right will not be difficult to find out. "Nor," he added, "will the prosecution itself be a lengthy one."

"And assuming that you are wrong," said Bryanstone, after a minute's thought, which you must at least acknowledge to be possible?"

"Assuming that I am wrong," answered Sir Hyde, "it would be simply offering a gratuitous insult to an innocent woman to let her know of what she had been accused. Whichever way you view it, the common-sense view of the matter is clear. If you inquire into it at all, let your wife remain supremely ignorant of your inquiries."

"If I inquire into it," remarked Bryanstone, with a grim smile. "Give me the wine, Dick, and don't look so woe-begone. One would think you had got some pleasant information to give me next."

"And so I have," cried Fairfax, starting up and speaking fast, with the kind of convulsive resolution a man feels when his horse, not his own will, is taking him straight at a fence

he would give anything to shirk. "I hinted so to you before dinner. I've some deuced unpleasant information to give you, and you may as well hear it at once. It's in everybody's mouth, that that blackguard Lumley talks about your wife; he says he knew her abroad, and—good God! Henry, that I should be the man to say it—that the whole thing was a plant. He knew from the first minute he saw you together how Miss Forrester was going to sell you.—There! what choice had I but to tell him, sir?" he added, addressing himself to Sir Hyde.

"None," said the old man, deliberately. "Just as he has no choice but to tell Mr. Lumley, in the most public manner possible, that he lies. You must do that duty first, Henry. Any search you may make afterwards is for your own private satisfaction."

"Yes," said Bryanstone, in a steady voice; but with his face horribly set, and white as marble. "If Dick's story is true, that will be my first duty, certainly. I ought to have done it years ago," he added, absently, after a minute or two's silence, and speaking more to himself than to his companions. "It's an old score. I ought to have shot him like the hound he was, after laying his cowardly hand upon *her*. Tell me the words again, Dick, the precise words, and the man or men you heard them from—one must be exact in these things—and pass the claret. The '47, sir, still, I perceive," he added, turning quietly to old Sir Hyde.

## CHAPTER XXII.

## HUSBAND AND WIFE.

"WHATEVER words you may use, Henry, choose the place well. I've seen as many of these affairs, perhaps, as any man in Europe, and all my observation has convinced me that a well-chosen place is everything in taking the first or initiative step. To insult a man inside a club or in the house of a friend is unwarrantable, save in hot blood, or under circumstances of immediate and gross provocation. To insult him without sufficient witnesses, or before witnesses of the wrong kind, is worse still. If he's a scoundrel like this Lumley, you never know what dirty falsifications he and his friends will set abroad respecting the beginning of the quarrel. You must meet him anywhere but in a club or in a friend's house, and you must have at least two men of unimpeachable character, not related to yourself, present at the time, with as many more friends of his, to force him to take up the affront. As to the words, none, in my opinion, for a low-born person like this, come up to the two time-honoured and simple expressions, liar and coward. But of this you must be the best judge when the time arrives."

It was long past midnight, and the three men were still sitting beside the dining-room fire. At ten o'clock, Sir Hyde and Richard had gone up for half an hour to the drawing-room; after which the ladies, only too glad to lose sight of each other, had retired, Sir Hyde playfully informing Letty and the bride before parting from them that their husbands were going to have a bachelor carouse with him as of old, and would not be heard of certainly till the following morning.

Honorina, usually most acutely suspicious, was thoroughly disarmed by Sir Hyde's *bonhomie*. It argued well for her, she thought, that the astute old man of the world held out his hand to her at once. She could brave all Mrs. Letty's coldness

so long as the head of the family received her unhesitatingly as his niece. And directly her head was on her pillow, and during all that long night of agony to Bryanstone, the woman who was the cause of it slept—no very unfrequent case with guilty people—like a child.

I do not use the word "agony" unadvisedly. Pride in his old unsullied name, personal pride, honour, vanity, all the strongest feelings of Bryanstone's as of most men's natures were stabbed to the quick by this blow that he had newly got. He was very quiet, as it was his temperament to be under any strong emotion; listened calmly to the shrewd worldly advice of old Sir Hyde, the kindly little outbursts of sympathy from Richard—the only two men on earth, mind, from whom, in such a strait, he could have received either advice or sympathy. He would go to London to-morrow morning, leaving Honoria (this Sir Hyde insisted upon) at Brentwood; would see Lumley at once; and then go on to Paris—leaving the arrangements for a meeting, if there was to be a meeting, in the hands of his friends.

"Before I run the chance of being shot," he said, "and Lumley, if his nerves will let him, can shoot, I should like to have set my mind at rest about her. If anything happens, it won't matter much to me, probably, whether my wife was Nita the dancer, or Honoria Forrester the governess; but I think it would give my hand additional steadiness for him to know that he had accused her wrongly."

"The place to meet him will be Tattersall's, I think," remarked Richard. "Poor little Chetwynd's horses are to be brought to the hammer to-morrow, and lots of fellows are coming up, I know, for the sale. As Lumley was one of the principal men who ruined him, no doubt he'll be one of the first among the Philistines. Really, with London as empty as it is, it's a shame to think of such a sale. Henry!" he added, "only that, of course, you don't care to talk of the subject now, I should advise you not to let such a chance pass. That black horse he gave five hundred guineas for in the spring would be just the thing for you—bone, size, everything you want, and thorough-bred as Eclipse."

"Well, we can do both kinds of business at once, then," said Bryanstone. "Whatever domestic happiness is before me, and whether I shoot Lumley or not,—in fact, under all conditions of life, except that of being shot myself, I shall



probably continue to want horses. I remember the one you mean, but I doubt any horse out of Chetwynd's stables carrying weight enough for me, except as a hack. I shall ride heavier than I used, Dick; German food and want of exercise have added a stone to my weight, at least, since last summer."

But though Bryanstone's voice and manner were so composed as to deceive his companions,—almost himself,—for we often unconsciously gauge our own mental suffering by the outward or bodily signs of it,—though he shook old Sir Hyde's hand with as warm a grasp, parted from Richard with as careless a good-night as in the old days when he was a schoolboy spending his jovial holidays at Brentwood, it needed only for him to be alone,—the strong man with his own fresh-smitten pride, his own loathing sense of new dishonour,—for him to realize to the full *what* shame this was that had come upon him—what foul whispered story this was that had thus suddenly turned aside the current of his life.

He did not love Honoria. This, he said to himself, was something. The kind of shipwreck that a girl's fair face had once wrought for him was at least not in her power to effect. All that a man must feel for the woman who bears his name, who holds his honour in her hands, he felt. Nothing more. She was a finished actress; but there is one part that no actress living can act, save behind the footlights,—love! Before he had been married to her a week, Bryanstone knew that she had not risked her reputation for him, but for herself. Knew it how, shall I say? Not by any coarse manifestations of want of regard,—she was too clever, too refined for this,—but rather by the nameless lack of all those thousand untaught and pathetic signs by which a man instinctively feels when a woman loves him.

And this—real passionate love—on her side, was the only thing that could have wiped out his recollection of the way in which he had been won. Failing in it, he did begin to feel, beautiful though Honoria was, from the earliest days of their marriage, how horrible a folly he had committed in marrying her. As a companion even she did not amuse him. The gist of half-legitimate flirtation and of her mock confidences respecting Lumley over, Honoria had very little, really, to say. How can a woman who only dare speak of one year and a half out of her whole bygone life say much? All the knowledge of

the London world and of London people that had made Laura Hamilton so welcome to him as a companion, was wanting in his wife. She had none of the fresh, English, girlish ways of thought that had made him take so strongly to poor little Nelly Bertram. A foreigner, whose whole thoughts were of society and of her own successes; a foolish woman, who spent her life between putting up her hair on pins and taking it down again. These were the ideas, joined to that other less pleasant one still of a woman who had feigned a love she never felt to win him, that Bryanstone had entertained of his wife whenever he was obliged to think of her at all. And during the short four months of their marriage, his time, greatly to her relief, had been spent much more in the society of such men as Homburg, Baden, and Brussels could afford than in hers.

But not to be in love with the woman one has married is no new or startling phase of human experience. Bryanstone just thought that, like other men, he had made a mistake. That Mrs. Bryanstone bored him a great deal, and that—well, when they got back to London, and she could run about to balls and operas, and leave him free to do as he chose, she would bore him less. Now, ordinary matrimonial disappointment had turned to keenest disgust; something scarcely deeper than indifference, into worse than hatred: the commonplace dull road wherein his own folly had condemned him to walk, had ended abruptly in a precipice. He, Henry Bryanstone, upon whose good name no faintest breath of suspicion had ever passed, married to a fourth-rate French dancer, a woman to whom society accords not even a doubtful character! And the world already cognisant—although he was not—of his shame!

So long as he was in the presence of others, he could scarce have told whether, in his own soul, he believed the accusation or not. He had to act the part, at least, of refusing to condemn her unheard; had to listen to the opinions of his companions: to go into details of the immediate work that lay before him. The moment he was alone he felt that every word of Sir Hyde's story was true, and of Farnham Lumley's also. As heat brings out words written in invisible ink, the first scorching words of suspicion seemed to evoke before him all the evidence, unheeded hitherto, of the past. Mrs. Hamilton's account of the sick secluded teacher, so unlike Miss Forrester in everything; her in-

capacity to teach Letty's children; Tontin's vague recollections of her face; the strangely-familiar terms upon which she stood with Farnham Lumley from the first—and against all this, what? Her own word, and the books and letters of a certain date which had been in the possession of some person named Honoria Forrester at Peckham.

I repeat he *felt* that he had been betrayed; and following the law of all great suffering, the idea of his betrayal had grown old to him at once. We need time to accustom us to a new happiness: a day, an hour after a new calamity, we feel that it is as familiar to us as our own right hand. It seemed to Bryanstone as though he could never have been wholly free from the stain of this accursed marriage. The blot seemed already to have stained back through all the whitest pages of his youth. Lady Sarah; the June nights when he stood, his arm round her waist, in the silent clover-fields; his schoolboy days here at Brentwood; his mother, who had been buried a quarter of a century ago; all the fairest recollections of his life rose before him, and all were tainted with some thought of Honoria Forrester—Nita, the dancer—Lumley's accomplice—his wife!

The rooms that had been given himself and his bride were the same that, since he was a boy, had always been looked on as "Mr. Henry's"—two large low rooms in the oldest part of the house. One, that had been his study or sanctum in old days, was arranged now as a dressing-room, and the high-piled wood fire still smouldered on the hearth as he entered it. He stirred up the embers, threw on some fresh logs, and then drew an arm-chair before the fire, seated himself there, and thought.

God keep me and you, reader, from such a vigil as that while we live!

The little timepiece on the mantelpiece roused him at length, with a start, from his thoughts, by striking three! Then it occurred to him to wonder how his wife was spending this night. Was she watching for him? was her uneasy conscience conjuring up visions of evil from his absence? Acting simply from an impulse he did not stop to question, Bryanstone rose, walked across the room; and after pausing a moment and hearing no sound from within, noiselessly opened

the door which divided the two rooms, and went up to Honoria's side.

One of her greatest accomplishments, or perhaps it may have been a natural gift, was the grace with which she slept. A silver night-lamp was placed on a table beside the bed, so as to throw an aureole of yellow light about her face; and as Bryanstone stood and watched her he was overcome with a sense, stronger than he had ever felt before, of her exceeding physical beauty. Slightly flushed, her lips just parted and no more, with a breathing sweet and noiseless as a child's, and one white hand carelessly thrown back above her head,—an artist might have taken this woman as a model, an incarnation of innocent untroubled sleep. In the subdued light, and with the soft white of the cambric and lace of her pillows to relieve the outlines of the face, she was undisguised even by the inevitable nocturnal pinning-up of her hair; nay, as he looked longer at her, Bryanstone could not but notice how noble a sweep of brow those yellow curls were daily made to hide away. He leant a little over her (not relenting—he was not a man to relent—but with one of those mixed feelings, half pity for himself and half for her, which most of us sustain when we chant the “*De Profundis*” of any dead love, even one that has been false from the first), and in doing so saw, what he had never seen before, a long jagged cicatrice on the left side of the full blue-veined forehead that was lying bare to his gaze.

Every one who can analyze his own emotions at all, must be familiar with those sudden, unbidden bursts of memory—those trains of reasoning, too subtle, too fine for us even to follow, but whose results we accept, and call instinct or intuition. Such an instinct—if we must call it so—appealed to Bryanstone with terrible force at this moment.

“The cut was deep and mortally close to the temple.” Why, he had been through all this before. He had stood and looked at her like this—for so does the mind confuse the present with the past, the real with the ideal—had heard those words from Farnham Lumley's lips! He had forgotten every circumstance of the dinner-party itself—had been unconscious, at the time while he talked to Fanny and to De Bassompierre, that any of Lumley's whispers had reached him from the conservatory. But the brain, without a man's own consciousness,

can write down on its mysterious tablets terrible evidence against himself, to be brought to light, as now, without recollection of the time or place in which the record was written. Stronger than all that he had heard against her to-night, was the mute witness that that scar upon the temple bore against Honoria to her husband. How, great heavens, and where, had Lumley known this woman, whom men knew now as Henry Bryanstone's wife? Was the shame he had faced to-night nothing in comparison of the blackness to come? Would he have to pray that the worst thing he might hear of the woman he had married was that she had been a ballet-dancer in her youth? He turned away from her with a shudder, and without looking at her face again. Then he returned to his place before the fire in his dressing-room, and waited for the day.

When the day came, all those who looked at him saw that Henry Bryanstone's face had suddenly oldened by a dozen years!

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## A DINNER IN LEICESTER SQUARE.

HONORIA quickest of all.

"He has heard something," she thought. "This was the meaning of the bachelor's carouse, for this he had been watching through the night. Now begins the fight in earnest. Is it the French valet, or Laura Hamilton, or Stretton? No; he would never dare betray me, and the money can't be gone yet. It must be that scoundrel Lumley. O, how different my life would be if I could work without making use of such vile materials!"

She acquiesced quietly when Bryanstone told her he was going to London with Fairfax for a week or two, and that she must remain at Brentwood without him.

"A sale of horses! O, Henry, don't forget to look out for a beautiful one for me; and—and don't be angry, but *would* you mind my going up with you as far as Reading? I want so much to spend a day with an old friend of mine, my favourite pupil, and she is married to a curate now; they live just outside the town, and have two little girls—one called after me—and I could return very well by the last train to-night."

She felt that if Bryanstone indeed suspected her, was on her track, the first persons whom he would be certain to find out would be the Jarvises. What would their answer be to his inquiries? A girl named Honoria Forrester, of half-French extraction, had lived with them for seven years; had left them in delicate health for Mrs. Forsyth's service two years ago, and, although she corresponded, had never been to see them since. Then would come more questions, questions as to her appearance—and Bryanstone possessed her photograph—that could have but one result. She must be beforehand with him. She must see these old women first. A little good acting, a little artistic making up, a sentimental story of a suspicious hus-

band, and the Miss Jarvises, good innocent fools, no doubt, would be ready to swear anything she bid them! At all events she must, at once and at all hazards, see them. She had taken bolder steps than cozening simple women out of the evidence of their own eyes before; would have to run far greater risks of failure still, if the terrible game that she saw before her was indeed to be played out. And taking her husband's silence as assent, she got ready by an early hour for her journey, and started off in cheerful spirits with him and Richard Fairfax to the train.

In such cheerful spirits, indeed, was Mrs. Bryanstone, that she talked a great deal more than was her wont during the entire journey; rallied her husband playfully on his silent temper; chattered away her hopes to Richard that he would insist upon Henry getting her a horse—"not too spirited—for, you know, Mr. Fairfax, I never had any experience in riding till poor Mr. Lumley," casting down her eyes, "was so good as to put his horses at my disposal—but showy, and looking more spirited than he is. Just think what a change it will be to me! I, who for seven years never went out, except to church, or saw a horse or carriage, except the doctor's, to have a brougham—Henry says I shall—of my own, and riding-horses too! O, what will the dear, good Miss Jarvises say the first time they see me a grande dame?"

And then she expatiated upon Miss Jarvis, and the old school-days, and the Reverend Alfred Prettyman, and her favourite pupils, with an expansion quite unusual: for, as I have said, Mrs. Bryanstone, since her marriage, had considered it wise to be taciturn.

"And when shall you drive to Peckham, then?" said Bryanstone once; the only time he opened his lips, save to smoke—for they were in a coupé, and one of Honoria's virtues was her love for tobacco-smoke. "The first day you get into your new carriage, I suppose?"

"O, I sha'n't have to go to Peckham at all," she answered innocently. "Didn't you know the Jarvises have left long ago? They live now—let me see—at No. 120, Guilford Street, poor old souls! or rather, they did when I heard of them last, a good many months ago. Just opposite the Foundling, you know, where you see the dear little children walk out in their white tippets and yellow stockings."

He was on the track. With a beating heart she felt that,

as she sat, smiling doubtless at the recollection of the dear children's yellow stockings, and looking out as they whirled along at the dreary December morning. He had asked the question on purpose. Well, she had the start. The Jarvises had left Guilford Street more than a year ago. By the time he had been there, and followed them to their new abode, she would have seen them. "The rest," true to her creed, she thought, "is for fate to do. I can only act out the part immediately before me to my best."

With a smiling little adieu to Fairfax, a kiss—the last she ever pressed there—on Bryanstone's forehead, she tripped out of the carriage at Reading. It was the first carriage of the train, and Richard Fairfax and her husband saw her move away quickly and disappear among the crowd of people on the platform.

"I feel a weight off my mind," said Bryanstone, when the train had started again. "Acting with a woman isn't an occupation to my mind. The air feels freer with every mile that takes me from her."

When the express stopped, a quarter of a mile from Paddington, the guard who collected tickets was imploringly addressed by a beautiful young woman, alone in a first-class carriage, at the extreme end of the train. Would he tell her, please, what she should do? She was to have stopped at Reading, and she never heard the name called, and they had brought her on all the way to London. What must she pay? how must she act?

She spoke in slightly-broken English, and looked with her soft caressing eyes straight into the guard's face—(a very handsome face too, Honoria thought: Saxon, fresh, manly, and with the winter dew clinging to his light-brown beard and hair). Would he let her make it right here? taking out her purse. She was so afraid of being thought to deceive the company, or anything.

I am not acquainted so thoroughly with the bye-laws of the Great Western as to state what was the guard's precise duty at this moment. What he did was to receive the additional payment of six-and-fourpence on the beautiful young woman's ticket; vouchsafe information as to the next down-train to Reading; and altogether look much more admiringly upon her face than his legitimate possessor in Wiltshire would probably have thought demanded by the occasion



"So far so good," thought Mrs. Bryanstone, putting on a prodigiously thick Shetland veil, and pinning her travelling-plaid up round her shoulders. "Now, if I can only keep dark sufficiently long at Paddington, I shall be safe for the time being, at least."

She kept dark, searching with artistic rendering of the traditional lonely female for one small bag, about fifteen inches by ten, that she had herself stowed impracticably away under the seat; and by the time she left the carriage, not a soul but the railway officials and one or two benighted old ladies, who ought to have been met, and were not met, was to be seen on the platform.

"Four-wheel or two, miss?" asked a policeman, in spite of the thick Shetland veil and travelling-plaid, taking her measure pretty accurately.

"Two," answered Honoria, who hated like a man being shut up; and in another minute she had still further confirmed policeman X's diagnosis by giving the address of a certain stage hair-dresser in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden, and was driving cheerfully along the foggy streets;—not a hundred yards behind the other hansom that contained Richard Fairfax and her husband.

"But for this detestable veil I could smoke," she thought. "How miserably trammelled women are in everything they have to do! How wonderful it is that, struggling against conventionalities and men, and their own sex most of all, any women ever succeed—but they do!"

Without the solace of artificial stimulant, however, Honoria's spirits were really first-rate. Action, intrigue, danger even, were as much better to sitting in a drawing-room with Letty embroidering, as driving disreputably alone in a hansom was to being boxed up, like other women she passed on the road from the station, with their babies and husbands and band-boxes inside hot, stuffy, immaculate private broughams. She had staked all, would stake all again, for respectability; and this her first transient escape from respectability was the hour in which, for the first time since she married, she felt anything of the old hearty zest in life. Put a *gamin* in the best-regulated infant school, a gipsy in a duke's livery; then leave a door open on a summer's morning, and you will just see how the same unconquerable instinct works. No Arab, whether of the street or of the

desert, ever thoroughly settles till you have six feet of earth over him; and then—well, then Arab and householder are about equally contented—for aught, at least, that we can tell to the contrary.

The hair-dresser's shop in Hart Street, where she dismissed the cab, was not unknown to Honoria. She had been there once, rather more than three years ago, in the discharge of a little affair she had on hand just then. The same lovely gentleman's head, with eyelashes carefully planted in pink waxen lids, vermilion nostrils, and velvet toga, still stood in the window: the same chocolate-coloured Frenchwoman, of inscrutable age, still stood behind the counter.

Madame desired to be coiffée? Would madame give herself the trouble to ascend? And the chocolate-coloured dame pointed to a grimy winding staircase in the middle of the shop, and sent a message through a funnel beside her elbow to the potentates of the first-floor.

Now Mrs. Bryanstone had not given herself the trouble of coming all the way to this small French hair-dresser's for nothing, as you will see.

"Monsieur," she remarked, in French, to the diminutive male creature who stood, a comb behind its ear, and a pinafore on its breast, bowing her into the *salon de coiffure*, an unsavoury room of about ten feet by eight, "Monsieur," and she took off her hat, "you remark the colour of my hair? Good; I require it changed to auburn, *châtain-roux*, for a piece I play in to-night. Can you do it? No dye, of course; one of the deep ochre washes that will come out with soap and water. Here is the tint." And she produced and unfolded a packet in which lay a thick piece of dull reddish hair—hair as unlike her own silky locks in hue and texture as you could well imagine.

Monsieur took up the pattern or sample, and held it close to Honoria's head. What Madame required was next to impossible, he averred. No colour more difficult to imitate, except in permanent dye. Indeed, he knew only one very expensive preparation, to which he gave a name of about seven syllables, that could effect it.

"Then get the expensive material ready at once, Monsieur," said Honoria, with a good-humour that the mere sight of a Frenchman could produce in her at once. "I knew that if there was one person in London who could do it for me, it

was yourself," she added, seating herself, and allowing the little man to swathe her in a wide-flowing but not too clean print dressing-gown. "It is Monsieur's speciality. Why, I remember your once turning red hair to golden. That, I am sure, is a much greater difficulty than to make light hair red."

Monsieur, at this appeal to his memory, eyed Mrs. Bryanstone more closely. "It was about three years or so ago," he remarked, after a minute's mysterious deliberation, "and Madame was——"

"Yes, Madame was—the other person!" interrupted Honoria, with great good temper. "Well, the positions are reversed now. And I only hope your success will be as great as it was before."

And then Monsieur unpinned her tresses real and artificial, and the little Louis-Seize curls were combed out straight, and the process of red-washing began.

"If I recollect right, we had every adventitious aid on the occasion referred to," remarked the Frenchman once, in the pause of allowing one mystic fluid to dry before the application of the next. "Madame confided to me that the chastened light of a sacred edifice and the flowing drapery of a lace veil would be there to aid the success of my poor efforts?"

"Oh, yes!" said Honoria, promptly; "all that was to be part of the *mise en scène*. It will be different now." She smiled to herself as she said this. "I shall be looked at without the sacred edifice or flowing veil, or religious observance of any kind."

"But on the boards always, and by gas-light, Madame?"

"O! of course on the boards and by gas-light," answered Mrs. Bryanstone.

When the process was at an end, she requested the Frenchman to arrange her hair after the English fashion of a dozen years ago—for so her part required—in a squarish line, that is to say, on the forehead, well brought down upon the cheeks, padded at the sides, and with a black velvet bow (this she had ready with her), at the back. You can scarcely imagine a travestie more complete than was effected by this change from silken locks, waving like flakes of gold upon the forehead, classically straight from the temples, and with cunning, careless curls floating on the shoulders, to a carroty, pomatumed head, dressed after one of the most hideous fashions that the female of our species has ever adopted. Honoria surveyed her

own image with undisguised content, complimented Monsieur on his success, and then demanded a towel and warm water to wash away one or two slight stains which she affirmed that she saw upon her forehead. She washed not only her forehead, but her whole face, and behold! another metamorphosis. Her skin was not bad, far from that; it was still a smooth, thoroughly wholesome skin, but it had lost all the indescribable softness, the peach-like bloom, which was her especial beauty ordinarily. In fine, an hour ago, a woman at whose radiant hair and skin every man that met her must turn to gaze, entered this hair-dresser's shop. There left it now a commonplace young person, of seven or eight-and-twenty, with a pale face, red hair, and no greater beauty than that of any other woman in the crowd.

"So much for good art," thought Honoria, when she found herself driving away again, her purse considerably lighter after paying Monsieur's little fee, but her pocket fuller from all the lovely golden curls carefully stowed away there. "I walked the whole length of that filthy Hart-street on purpose, and not a creature looked at me,—what a life plain women must have of it, by the way! Oh, that I may seem hideous and *vraisemblable* enough in the eyes of these old Hecates I'm going to! Which is the oldest, I wonder, and which must I call 'Miss Jane?' I must wait till I hear them speak to each other before I commit myself. Heavens! if I should meet him there! But it's scarcely possible—and if I do—if I do—discovery can only come once—and heartless as they all are, they could not, dare not, leave me penniless. After my generosity, too, in marrying him without settlements! Yes, I shall carry it through,—I feel it"—at this juncture she unfolded a huge paper of chocolats that she had bought on the road, and began cracking them between her white teeth with all the gusto of a Parisian work girl enjoying her Sunday in the Bois. "I'll go to the Sablon Rouge to dine," she thought, when her little luncheon was finished. "No one would recognise me dressed in this frightful English hat and veil, and 'twill cheer my spirits up to talk to the waiters in French. Then to another hair-dresser, unless I've time before dinner—go back from red to yellow, from forty to eighteen, and then back to Brentwood and Sir Hyde, and dear Letty, and the cousins. What a day I shall have had of it! The most amusing altogether that I've spent since I married Mr. Bryanstone."

4

The address from which the Misses Jarvis had last written to her, on Mrs. Forsyth's death, was No. 1, Mignonette-villas, Brixton. To No. 1, Mignonette-villas, Honoria now drove, and to her satisfaction found that the old ladies still lived there and were at home. She dismissed the cab, rightly judging that if her husband should arrive, she would stand more chance of detection with a cabman ready to volunteer information at the front door; and, not without considerable beating of her heart, followed in an elderly woman-servant who had answered the bell.

"What name shall I say?" asked the old body, looking suspiciously through Honoria's veil, as she stood, her hand on the lock of the parlour door. "Miss or Missus?"

"Mrs. Bryanstone," said Honoria, still keeping her veil down, in her utter ignorance whether the servant was a creature to be recognised or not. "Miss Jarvis will know who I am."

And then the door opened, and "Mrs. Bryanstone" was announced; the old woman, after the manner of old familiar servants, waiting with two inches of the door ajar, to see what sort of reception might accrue to the visitor.

Two meek-looking elderly women, dressed in black, sat before the fire. Twenty years' teaching did not seem to have resulted in much temporal success to the Misses Jarvis; but poor though their little parlour and their dress were, Honoria saw at a glance that they were gentlewomen, and felt relieved. She knew that she could appeal better to an educated audience than to the coarse sympathies of outspoken question-asking vulgarity. These poor, broken, spiritless old ladies would not have life enough in them to question her, or animal strength enough to make the physical effort of disbelieving.

She threw back her veil with a quick, natural gesture, like that of a person coming home, took off her hat, and approached to the older, and she fervently trusted the blinder, of the two sisters. "Miss Jarvis, you recognise me!" she exclaimed.

But Miss Jarvis did not recognise her. The old servant in announcing her had changed Bryanstone into Bridleton, or some such name, and both of the ladies rose and stared politely, but without speaking, at their unexpected guest. Honoria's breath came thick. Had she been over-bold? Was

the travestie that had once been so successful, a failure this time?

"You—you don't remember Honoria Forrester, she murmured, and tears rushed up to her eyes. "Am I indeed so changed?"

"Honoria!" cried the younger sister, and in a minute her arms were round the visitor's neck. "Dear child—this is a surprise, indeed! I thought it was Honoria Forrester," she added, turning to her sister, "and yet I couldn't trust myself to speak. You are changed—wonderfully changed—so stout, so improved in every way, my dear—Mrs. Bryanstone, I ought to say. Sister, is she not changed?"

Now the eldest Miss Jarvis, a very shrewd, sensible woman, had long been failing in her eyesight, and necessarily took for granted whatever Miss Jane, who could see, but was the weakest and most gullible of human creatures, chose to assert. "I see worse than ever, my dear," she said kindly, taking Mrs. Bryanstone's hand, "and for a moment I certainly did not recognise your voice. Bridget," and she turned to the door, "are you there? Come in and see Mademoiselle. I daresay Bridget remembered you quicker than either of us, dear. Bridget never forgets a face she has once seen."

This pleasant announcement made Honoria turn abruptly away from the light as the old woman entered. However, she put on a very hearty manner, and holding out her hand, hoped condescendingly that Bridget had not forgotten her.

But Bridget, a steadfast servant, a friend of thirty years to the Jarvises, had always entertained a profound abhorrence for all the foreign masters and governesses connected with the school, "Mamselle Honore" not excepted; and her reception of Mrs. Bryanstone's condescension was far from genial. Ignoring the proffered hand, she walked up to her and looked close—so close as to make Mrs. Bryanstone shudder—at her new-dyed, stiff-pomatumed hair; then at her face; and finally at every item of dress in which she stood.

"Fine feathers makes fine birds, and dress, for certain, makes people look different," she remarked, when her inventory was finished; and, addressing herself to the elder Miss Jarvis, not the visitor. "If Mamselle was in her black frock again, I don't say there would be much difference to speak of,

except the colour of her hair, which it's well known as oiling and pomatuming will alter the sandiest. Mamselle is stouter, as we all grow in the course of years, and redder i' the face"—Mrs. Bryanstone was red enough at this moment—"and that's all that I see her changed."

And then Bridget, with obtrusive disregard of the presence of company, made inquiries as to whether dinner was to be served at the usual time or not, and strode out of the room.

"Catch me a stuffing up the heads of any of your furrin' trumpery," she thought to herself as she pated the potatoes. "She's changed as I wouldn't have known her on the street—quite a lady now, bless you! and her freckles took away, and her sallow thin cheeks spread out with good eating, and her carroty 'ead greased up to the nines, and so fine we can stoop to shake hands with a servant in our grand kid gloves! But catch me a-puffing you up, my lady!" thought Bridget, fiercely. "Catch me a-being carpeted and catechised by all the furrin' governesses as walk! She may be married, or she mayn't! 'Tain't by marriage that the likes of *she* comes or'nary by black velvet mantles and hats and feathers, and the beautifullest brown silk dress that 'ud stand alone, and trailing half-a-yard in the mud behind—drat her!"

Our enemies oftentimes serve us better than our friends. In her wholesome fear of ministering to "Mamselle's" pride, poor old Bridget had unconsciously given the strongest evidence to her identity.

"She is as rough as ever, you see," said Miss Jane to Honoria, "though good and faithful always. But Bridget is right in one thing," she added, turning to her sister; "our dear Mademoiselle is wonderfully stouter than she used to be. Do you know Mad—Mrs. Bryanstone I ought to say—that when you left we were very uneasy about you; indeed, I don't mind saying it, now you look so well, Doctor Pinniger had the very gravest doubts himself as to the state of your lungs.

"Great heavens, who's Dr. Pinniger?" thought Honoria. "I must get them away out of all this dreadful labyrinth as quickly as possible.—I have been much better since my marriage, dear Miss Jane." It seemed the household custom to prefix the adjective "dear" to all proper names, and she accepted it unconditionally. "My husband and I have spent

some time in travelling abroad, which, as far as health goes, has been of great benefit to me."

And emphasizing "health" with a sigh, Mrs. Bryanstone seated herself on the sofa beside Miss Jane, and put on the kind of face young married women do put on when they want to be questioned as to their domestic happiness.

Miss Jane gave a little cough, and glanced at her sister; the well-acted freemasonry telling on her at once. "Travelling is very improving to the mind and heart, dear Honoria," she suggested, with her head a little on one side—for poor Miss Jane, at forty-five, was sentimental still.

"Under some circumstances—under most circumstances—it doubtless may be so," answered Honoria. "But, dear ladies, my old friends!" with a little burst, "why should I conceal it from you? There has been—there is—a flaw in my married happiness—my husband's confidence"—and here she inclined her face hysterically towards Miss Jane's shoulder. The elder lady sat silent, painfully remembering that there were only two chops, and a pudding made in a saucer, for dinner; and hoping dear Mademoiselle would not stay very long. Miss Jane searched instantly for her pocket-handkerchief.

"I was never so surprised in my life," she murmured. On an average, Miss Jane had never been so surprised in her life about eleven times every day. "Young, handsome, rich, a scion of aristocracy, and——"

"And jealous!" murmured Honoria, in a trembling voice. "Jealous of me, dear Miss Jane, of my past life and my present one! Oh that we had never gone abroad! It was hearing me talk in German—which Mr. Bryanstone unhappily doesn't understand—to an old Austrian officer at the table-d'hôte, which first aroused this dreadful phantom that embitters my life. This is what it is to be half a foreigner! This is what it is to have married beyond one's own condition of life!" she exclaimed passionately.

At this pathetic statement even old Miss Jarvis forgot the mutton-chops, and joined in lamentations with Miss Jane. The idea of Mademoiselle, the staid, gloomy, reserved woman, who had lived under their roof without speaking or seeking to speak to a man for seven years, being suspected of light conduct now! Her past life called in question, too! What a monster of stupid jealousy this husband must be! A past



that has been spent exclusively in the society of school-girls, and, since she left their charge, in the care of one invalid old lady!

"But though I tell him all this," said Honoria, when the sisters had chirped their little duet of wonder and condolence, "though I repeat detail by detail how every day of my life here used to be passed with you, his morbid discontent with me continues the same. I do everything I can to please Mr. Bryanstone, even to gratifying any fancy that he takes respecting my dress or appearance. To-day, knowing that you would like me best as my old self, I have dressed my hair plainly; but generally, dear Miss Jane, will you believe me? I wear it as you see it in old pictures, a mass of little frizzed curls, reaching straight down to my eyebrows."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Miss Jane. She was not ordinarily profane; but the thought of Mademoiselle's scarlet hair dressed out in such a fashion was too much for her. "It can't become you, dear. I never was so much surprised in my life. Sister, do you hear? Poor Mademoiselle's husband makes her wear her hair in frizzed curls straight down to her eyebrows!"

The old lady lifted up her mild little mittened hands two inches at least. "Such is life," she observed, with resignation. "And so end the hopes of all who make their idol of clay. Dear Mrs. Bryanstone, allow me, as an old and tried friend, to inquire where—where have you sought for help in this difficulty?"

"Well," said Honoria, out of her depth altogether, "I got a very nice maid at Frankfort, who knew the way of dressing the hair *à la Louis Seize* perfectly, and she prevented me looking such a fright as I did at first; but still——"

"I don't think you quite understand, dear," interrupted Miss Jane. "Charlotte's allusion was not to things temporal."

"I should think it very likely," cried the old lady, remembering the chops again, and knowing perhaps how apt spiritual conversation is to lengthen out, "very likely indeed that your poor husband is a little insane. Don't you think so, Jane? Doctor Pinniger has told me that the first symptom his own dear wife showed of her disorder was in taking up groundless jealousies and dislikes against him."

"Good old creature!" thought Honoria, "the very sugges-

tion I wanted." "I must confess"—this aloud—"that this most fearful thought is not entirely new to me. Mr. Bryanstone's sister is a most extraordinary little person; and old Sir Hyde, with whom we are now staying, is more than eccentric. Still I hope—I hope that brighter days are in store for me. This morbid fancy once put aside, I would trust to time for the rest. Now, suppose," she gave one rapid glance at the face of the elder but, as she felt, the sharper woman, "just suppose Mr. Bryanstone should ever come to you for confirmation of his doubts? There at once might be a means for restoring him to his old peace of mind."

Miss Jane was just beginning to say something gushing, when the old lady by the fire interrupted her somewhat sharply. "Jane, you know very well that we have done with the world, and the world's passions and vanities," she observed. "Husband and wife should settle their own differences, without the help of foolish old women like us. Study to please him, Mrs. Bryanstone, and, unless your husband is absolutely insane, it is impossible that he can continue to keep up this ridiculous suspicion concerning the past. Quite. I never heard such a thing."

There was an altered tone in her voice; and Honoria rose and put on her hat instantly. She was too thorough an artist to risk overdoing her part by one hair's-breadth.

"Bless you for those words, my kind friend!" she faltered. "They recall me to my duty—to the only source from whence I can look for help. You are right. No one should interfere between husband and wife. I—I—must bear my cross unaided." Mrs. Bryanstone remembered having seen this metaphor in some good little book of Letty's, and thought it might not be amiss to bring it in now.

"And Jane and I will never cease to remember you with interest," said old Miss Jarvis, rising also, and growing much more hearty now that her uneasiness respecting dinner was being set at rest.

"And if it was in our power to do anything——" hazarded poor Miss Jane.

"If," said Honoria, solemnly, and looking from one to the other of the sisters, "if Mr. Bryanstone should ever come to you unknown to me, and put questions regarding the years I lived with you, I do not even ask what your answer to him would be. I feel it."

She embraced both of the old ladies with hurried agitation, made her way from the house—only too thankful not to encounter Bridget's sharp eyes again, and in another ten minutes had found out a cab-stand, and was on her way back, not altogether dissatisfied with her afternoon's work, to London.

She drove to a hair-dresser's shop in Oxford-street, was washed back from red to gold, had the flowing curl upon the shoulder, the Louis-Seize coiffure upon the forehead restored, and then, true to her resolution, went off to dine in Leicester-square. Three years ago, just before she went into Mrs. Forsyth's service, she had had occasion more than once to dine at one of the second-rate French restaurants of that cosmopolitan locality, and to this house she now betook herself. It was between four and five o'clock, and the dining-room into which Mrs. Bryanstone entered was tolerably well filled, for Leicester-square knows no great difference between June and December.

"I was right to come here," she thought, when her dinner was ordered, and she sat listening to the familiar beloved buzz of French voices around her. "It's a tonic to my moral courage; it reminds me there's another world (not a bad world either) besides the world I stand in with such precarious footing now. Diable!" she continued to herself, as she raised her veil, and commenced to eat her soup with excellent zest, "I shall need all my courage soon! By the time I get back to-night the Jarvises may have betrayed me to Bryanstone, and a message have been already telegraphed to Brentwood. Wine, of course," to the garçon. "Château-Margaux, and see that it is of the best. A demi-bouteille of champagne with the dessert. At least," she thought, "I can take my wine like a Christian for once! Not swallow champagne with my meat, like these barbarian islanders. Never mind that my Château-Margaux is *vin ordinaire*, and my champagne gooseberry. I'd sooner drink it free, and listening to French bagmen's voices round me, than have the best wine from Sir Hyde's cellar, and the starched butler, and the family conclave, and the rest of it. So much for ambition! So much for the prize I worked so hard—put myself at the mercy of a wretch like Lumley—to win!"

Now all the time that Mrs. Bryanstone dined and moralized, a Frenchman, seated somewhat in shadow at the extreme end

of the dining-room, never once ceased to watch her intently. He was not dining—he did not look as if he had the wherewithal to dine; a cup of coffee alone was before him on the little marble table, a foreign newspaper in his hand. The man was young, six or seven-and-twenty perhaps, strikingly handsome, and with an air of refinement on his pale face that contrasted singularly with the poverty of his clothes. And this poverty was the most utter poverty of all, the last squalid vestiges of what had once been luxury. A well-cut frock-coat, threadbare all over, ragged at the cuffs, and tightly buttoned across the place where a shirt should have been, but was not; a pair of summer trousers that had made too close an acquaintance with the inky London pavement; varnished boots, in holes; and a battered cloth hat, pulled down low over its miserable wearer's eyes.

Those eyes, could Honoria have seen them, wore an expression that might have frightened even her, as they watched her in the calm enjoyment of her well-appointed meal. Such sheer animal suffering, such defiant pride, such strange exultation was blent in them as actually lit up his face, in spite of its entourage of dirt and penury, into a beauty scarcely human.

"Found again—again!" he murmured to himself. "In velvets and silks too, and here! So much for believing in a woman's death; so much for being sentimental over a grave in Père-la-Chaise! Yes, you shall drink your wine! Yes, you shall eat your food without interruption!—and then—a dessert such as you little expect is before you!"

And he rose, coasted stealthily round the room, and placed himself, holding up a newspaper as if reading it at the gas-light, not five paces from Mrs. Bryanstone.

When she had done her *salmi* of partridges, and the best dessert the house could boast was being placed before her, she ordered some coffee, a little glass of liqueur, and cigarettes. Turkish tobacco, if they had any.

"And if not, I can supply the deficiency," said a voice in French close beside her. "I have some of the old mixture still. Madame—Nita—will you allow me to join you?"

Mrs. Bryanstone started round, and as she caught sight of the stranger's face, in spite of all her self-command, a half-shriek rose to her lips—

"Jacques!"

## CHAPTER XXIV.

## MRS. BRYANSTONE IN AFFLICTION.

FOR one week after she first heard of Henry Bryanstone's marriage, Nelly Bertram had succumbed utterly. Then, the first dull stupefaction of the blow over, had gone back to copying her old self so patiently, day by day and line by line, that no one in the house ever saw it was only a copy, and that the original—the joyous young existence that used to live and flow on unconscious of itself or of its own happiness—was in its grave for ever.

People are very slow in discovering the counterfeit from the real in this kind of matter. If your household companion, daughter, niece, wife, whatever you will, gets up as usual in the morning, sees to your comfort, is cheerful at your meals, plays your backgammon, or piquet, with you of an evening, what should make you suspect the part to be an acted one? All Mr. Bertram required was in Nelly still. Her tears, her groans were for her pillow. What should Uncle Frank know of them?

So the autumn passed. Winter came, and froze the wet moors and lanes into iron, and again the ground was dry enough for Nelly to walk in the short, dull twilight along the uplands where she had walked, when summer lay purple on the moors, with Bryanstone. She had not so much time for idling out of doors as she used to have. With premature knowledge, she had learnt that life's one panacea is work; and with no other object save the healing of her own pain, she worked; at her Latin, at her Mathematics; when her head was too aching and wearied for these, at her common household duties. I need scarcely tell you that a man of Mr. Bertram's age and position loved eating. During this winter Nelly surpassed herself in preparing new dishes for his table; savoury pies, French ragôts, little omelettes for his supper

and breakfast. That she ate none of them herself I don't say. She was not at all a woman to hang her head, and fret, and starve, because some man had refused to return her love. She studied her Latin and mathematics; cooked, and ate the savoury pies and ragoûts; visited the cottagers; worked at her needle; played backgammon with her uncle; and, as the December days wore on, quite believed that she had lived the old grief down and was healing fast. But she did not gain flesh: and every night before she slept, scalding tears wetted her pillow as freely as they had done a week after Bryanstone's wedding-day.

"You should walk about more, Nelly," said her uncle, one bitter January night, with the wind sobbing, the snow drifting against the parlour window-pane. "I saw Miss Surtees to-day, and she bade me tell you that you have not been once to see her this winter."

"I don't think Miss Surtees cares whether I go to see her or not," answered Nelly. "Whenever we do meet, she does nothing but give me long accounts of her own exploits across country or with her gun, for all of which I care nothing."

"Well, no—how should you?" said Mr. Bertram, complacently. "I've brought you up according to my ideas of what your sex should be, Nelly. I had an idea once—well, never mind, 'twas not at all like Miss Surtees. An unsexed woman is my horror. Whatever God Almighty may in his wisdom have made women for, 'twas not to rival men in the hunting-field—that their structure plainly shows us; though he would be a rash man indeed who should attempt to define the province for which they were made. But though Miss Surtees is no model for you, she is still a neighbour, child, and to-day she asked for you kindly. Indeed, I believe she said she had a message, a note, or something of the sort to give you."

Nelly's cheeks kindled. "A letter for me, Uncle Frank! are you sure?"

"Well, I think so. Let me see; I met her by Brooks's farm, and she wanted me to turn with her to The Place, and——"

"And my letter, Uncle Frank? Are you sure you don't know whom the letter was from?"

"From? No. child; how should I know anything about it?"

—If I can throw a quatre ace next time I win the gammon. —Yes, I do, though ; of course, of course, I remember it all. Who was the young woman you nursed in a fever last summer ? We read the marriage afterwards in the paper, you may recollect, to a Mr.—Mr.—he called here once or twice, unless my memory fails me.”

“Is the letter from Mrs. Bryanstone ?”

“From her or from her husband. Some accident or other has happened to him, and they wanted to tell you of it, and not remembering our address, enclosed the letter to Miss Surtees—If you were to throw seizes every time, you couldn’t save yourself—how many games is it that I have beat you this week ?”

That night Nelly did not shed her accustomed tears when she laid her head upon her pillow ; but all night long her sleep was broken with dreams—feverish, impossible dreams, all of Bryanstone, all of evil in some form overtaking him, and of her incapacity to help him. At one time she saw him standing before the altar with Miss Forrester, and when the priest began to charge them both “as they would one day answer at the day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed,” the bridegroom turned his head and looked at her. And she tried to speak, and tell him of that midnight meeting she had witnessed with Stretton, but could not ; and the ceremony went on, and they were married. And as they passed her, going to the vestry, she dreamed that Bryanstone stooped and asked her why she had not saved him ? And then the bride and bridesmaids, and all the crowd of faces in the church, seemed to look and mock at her ; and Bryanstone turned away with disgust and hatred, and took his bride into his arms and kissed her. And as their lips touched the likeness of Miss Forrester seemed to fade away, and a woman with horrible features was in her stead. And then that, too, changed and fell into ashes, and only the bridal dress and veil lay on the ground at Nelly’s feet.

This dream, turned and distorted through a dozen different shapes, but still with the same leading incidents for its motive, she dreamed till daybreak. Then, when she had woke up thoroughly, and reasoned with herself, and gone to sleep again, she dreamed another time. And now she saw Bryanstone, pale and bleeding upon a sofa, with no one near to tend him ; and suddenly he held his arms out, and cried, “Nelly !” and

she went and fell upon his breast. And from this dream she woke sobbing like a child—what was she better than a child?—who has been frightened in his sleep.

It was a cheerless winter morning, the north wind setting sheer across the marshes, and every now and then bringing up a clinging mist, half rain half sleet, from the sea; but Nelly felt neither cold wind nor clinging mist as she walked along the dark two miles of common that separated the Parsonage from Lowick Place. The intense longing to hear of Bryanstone, to have Bryanstone's letter in her hand, possessed her to such an extent that she was simply insensible to object or idea apart from him; and when she found herself in Miss Surtees' morning room, she was unconscious, for the first time in her life, of either the want of sympathy or the positive look of freezing contempt on that strong-minded young woman's hard face.

"My uncle says you have a letter for me. I have come for it."

Miss Surtees, who was seated at breakfast before the fire, stretched her hand out to the mantelpiece, took a letter from it, and threw it down upon the table. "You know the contents, I suppose?" she volunteered. "You've heard of his accident?"

"Mr. Bryanstone——" and Nelly's lips blanched.

"He has fought a duel already for that woman you nursed here, and has got shot through the lungs, and now they want you to go and nurse him. What in the world ails you, child? Are you ill?"

"It—it was sudden, Miss Surtees. I'll sit down, please." And Nelly turned away and sank down on the nearest seat—a low ottoman by the window—the very same one where Miss Forrester had *posed* for innocence and family affection on that August morning, eight months ago, when she first got Henry Bryanstone to undertake her money business with Stretton.

Miss Surtees looked curiously for a minute at the rigid figure and poor little horror-struck face before her, then turned abruptly away and began to poke the fire vigorously. She was not a bad woman, in the very worst sense of the word; but she really had had scant experience of the accident that commonly makes women soften, and felt as helpless as a man when she was thrown across sentimental sorrow of



any kind. Years ago, when she was quite a child, Miss Surtees had herself gone through one solitary love-affair, and had come to cruellest grief in it. From that time till the present her heart had been shut against men, hard to women. With the former she hunted, shot, and smoked; with the latter she was uniformly, consistently odious. She would as lief have embroidered bead bags, or presided at Dorcas meetings, as have listened to the detail of any ordinary love-story. But somehow at this moment she did not feel unkind or even impatient towards Nelly. The silent despair, the sudden white horror of the plain childish face, took the situation altogether out of the regions of young-lady sentimentalism, and brought it down to that common ground of mere physical pain with which few men or women are too hard to sympathize.

"You've got a chill, walking on an empty stomach, child," she remarked, after a minute or two. "Take something hot at once, and the spasm will pass." And she poured out a cup of coffee and pushed it across the table to her guest.

The attention from one ordinarily so pitiless as Miss Surtees smote Nelly's overcharged heart so keenly that she burst into tears. "Do you think there's a chance for him?" she cried, looking up piteously from the three or four blurred lines that constituted Bryanstone's letter. "Do you think any one could be shot through the lungs and recover? Why, it's ten days ago now since it happened," and she rose up wildly. "I must start at once, and go and nurse him. Oh, Miss Surtees!" and she set down the untasted coffee again upon the table; "do you think there's any chance for him? I'd like you to say the truth."

Miss Surtees was silent. Her own opinion, gathered from the letter she had herself received from Honoria, was that Bryanstone was dying; but she could not—no, for the life of her she could not say so to Nelly. "My cousin, Max Surtees, was shot in the chest from a gun when he was a boy," she remarked, when the girl's eager eyes forced her to speak, "and he recovered, though he's never been very strong since. But then that was a very different thing. Mrs. Bryanstone speaks of inflammation——"

"I see, I understand," and the trembling hands clutched Bryanstone's letter up convulsively to her heart. "I know quite well what you mean. Miss Surtees, how long will it

take me to reach Brussels, please? Uncle Frank knows nothing of travelling."

Miss Surtees thought to herself that Uncle Frank would never be fool enough to let his niece start alone to the Continent at this hasty summons, even though it may be the summons of a dying man. However, she abstained from entering upon any question likely to be provocative of more emotion; and, taking down a foreign Bradshaw from the book-shelf, commenced telling Nelly the particulars of the route.

"I'll write it, please, Miss Surtees, as you make it out, so that I can't mistake in telling Uncle Frank." And then Miss Surtees having furnished her with a card and pencil, Nelly did command herself, and with shaking fingers and blinded eyes, wrote down, in her usual neat little hand, all the necessary details of the journey.

"If—if—when Mr. Bryanstone recovers, I shouldn't advise your stopping with these people," remarked Miss Surtees when they had finished, down to the number of francs between Ostend and Brussels. "I was introduced first to Miss Forrester by Mrs. Hamilton, a woman of no very strict ideas herself, and afterwards she managed to get my father to ask her here with the Haighs, no doubt in pursuit of Bryanstone. I'm the last person to interest myself in any small scandal, but for your own sake, I say, keep clear of her. The fact of her husband being dragged into a duel about her shows what stamp of woman she is."

"Can you tell me anything about the duel? It would be Uncle Frank's first question."

"I can read you Mrs. Bryanstone's letter. No, stay, you may take it with you and let him see it." And Miss Surtees produced a letter from the table-drawer, gave it to Nelly, shook hands more kindly with her than she had ever done before in her life, and then bade her good-bye and take care of herself.

When she was alone, on her road to the Parsonage once more, Miss Bertram drew forth Bryanstone's note and read it again and again, till the scalding tears hid it from her sight. It was blurred and irregular, and consisted of these words: "I'm badly wounded my dear Nelly, and I believe it will go hard with me. Can you come? I want to see you once more. H. B."

And this was Mrs. Bryanstone's letter :—

“DEAR MISS SURTEES,—May I ask you to give the enclosed note to your dear young friend, Miss Bertram, whose address I have forgotten ? I am in the deepest affliction on account of my beloved husband, and her presence, if she should come, would be of the utmost comfort to me. About a fortnight ago dearest Henry left me, in perfect health and spirits, and telling me that he would be absent on a visit of a week or two in London. Imagine my horror a few days later—I was staying at the time with Sir Hyde Bryanstone—on receiving a telegraphic message to say that he had been dangerously wounded *in a duel* ! I flew to him at once, and found him, as it seemed to me, at death's door—shot through the right lung. The pretext of the quarrel was something about horses, between him and Mr. Farnham Lumley, I believe at Tattersall's, and it was arranged that they should go over at once to Brussels. They fought, *awful* to say ! at twelve paces, with pistols, and were to shoot while one, two, three (I have learnt this afterwards), was being said. Dearest Henry is an excellent marksman, but that horrid Lumley, they say, fired at the word ‘two,’ and wounded him. They have extracted the ball this morning ; but there is great fear of inflammation setting in, and all I can do is to kneel silently at his bedside, *and pray* ! What makes my agony greater, is the thought that I am the cause of it. My beloved Henry misconstrued, I believe, some remarks that were made about me by Mr. Lumley in town, and carried away by his too *chivalrous sense of honour*, this deplorable affair is the result. Poor fellow ! in his suffering he remembers with gratitude the kind little girl who, under God's blessing, saved me, and wishes her here to participate in and lighten my attendance. In the deepest affliction, dear Miss Surtees, sincerely yours,

“HONORIA BRYANSTONE.

“P.S. I need scarcely mention that any expense to which Miss Bertram's journey puts her will rest with me.’

## CHAPTER XXV.

## THE COUNT ST. GEORGES.

MR. BERTRAM fought out the whole proposal, inch by inch, of Nelly's going to Brussels. It was improper for young women to travel alone. The plan was senseless, because Mr. Bryanstone would be either dead or better when she got there. Duels were godless proceedings. What business had the young man to mix himself up in one of them? If he knew there was no truth in the statement made against his wife, he should have treated the falsehood with contempt; if there was truth in it, Mrs. Bryanstone wasn't a fit person to sympathize with. And it was improper for young women to travel alone, and the plan was senseless—and then the same round again and again; with or without variations.

"Uncle," cried Nelly, passionately, when all her small stock of argument was expended, "if Mr. Bryanstone dies without my seeing him, I shall never forgive myself, and never be as I have been again while I live. You can keep me from going, of course, but I say the truth in this. I shall never feel happy again if Mr. Bryanstone dies without my seeing him."

Her sudden outburst, her distended, tearless eyes did more than all her common-sense pleading had the power to effect. Of her unhappy passion, of the possibility of her even entertaining anything save friendship, for a married man, it was not in Uncle Frank's simple heart to dream. She had taken a liking to the Bryanstones from the fact of having nursed the young woman in her fever. Some romantic idea of her presence bringing Mr. Bryanstone through his accident, made her so resolutely bent upon obeying his summons. Perhaps it might be best to let her have her way. An hysterical young woman is always a dangerous creature to oppose. He remembered his sister, Nelly's mother, and her white face and spiritless, early-closed life—just because they had made her marry

one man instead of another, or some such trifle! What if Nelly should be the same? What if Bryanstone should die without her seeing him, and she should indeed, as she had said, never be the same again?

"'Tis the first time in your life I've known you thoroughly unreasonable, child," he remarked, not without temper, when he had finally given way. "You have always hitherto shown the capacity, at least, to sit down and reason a thing out, as well as if Providence, in its mercy, had made you a boy. But it would be too much, it would be expecting far too much, now that you are a woman grown, to see you consistent still! I invite your Aunt Lydia to keep my house?" This was in answer to a former suggestion of Nelly's. "I thank you, I thank you very much indeed for your consideration, but prefer being alone. For a fortnight, at least, I will be undisturbed by women, and by women's fancies."

And in the portion of his sermon which he wrote that night, he commended St. Paul's wisdom with warmth; and not only as a priest, but as a man and a brother, advised such of his hearers as were yet unmarried to abide even as he was. But this verse of Corinthians was at all times a favourite text of the Vicar of Lowick.

On the evening of the second day after leaving home, Nelly found herself driving through the streets of Brussels. She had not stopped to rest since she quitted her uncle's house. Straight on, with feverish haste, and only as much sleep as she could snatch upon the road, she had obeyed Bryanstone's summons. What if with all her haste she should be too late? What if alien tongues, if cold untroubled faces, should break that awful news to her? If all her reward should be to kneel beside a silent bed, and press her lips upon a cold, unanswering hand?

During the tedious hours of her journey imagination had painted her arrival in a hundred different ways; but in each picture Bryanstone had been able to speak to her, to take her hand in his, to show consciousness, in some way, of her coming. It was only now that she was actually close to him, in the same city that he lay, that the darkest, perhaps the most natural, foreboding of all came into her mind. And worn with fatigue and fasting, her courage did at last give way, and she cried—cried like a heart-broken child—all the way from the railway terminus to the remote quarter of Brussels in which

the Bryanstones were living. Anything more forlorn it would be hard to imagine than Nelly's whole appearance when, with travel-worn dress and tear-stained, deathlike face, she was ushered, on her arrival at the hotel, into Mrs. Bryanstone's presence.

And Mrs. Bryanstone was dressed for dinner—dressed, flushed, animated, as if to render the contrast the more cruel! Nelly had imagined—Heaven knows what she had imagined!—a wife kneeling pale and awe-struck, perhaps, by her husband's side, in a dimly-lighted chamber; a woman worn with remorse for the awful fate of which she, however innocent, had been the hapless cause. She was shown into a room brilliant with soft light, and warm with the ruddy blaze of a well-heaped wood fire; a room hung—as the state rooms of foreign hotels are—with crimson and white; with brackets of ormolu gleaming among the drapery; with looking-glass from ceiling to floor wherever looking-glass could be placed; with a round table drawn up before the fire, and at this moment holding a goodly supply of fruit and wines; and with two persons, one Mrs. Bryanstone, the other an unusually handsome Frenchman of about seven or eight-and-twenty, in the full enjoyment of a convivial *tête-à-tête*.

Honoraria was looking superb. Nelly's first thought—yes, before she thought of Bryanstone—was of this woman's beauty. She was in a dress of brilliant smalt-blue silk; the body cut high upon the shoulders, low in front, and trimmed round the bosom and sleeves with the finest Mechlin lace. On one white arm was a single coil of yellow Indian gold; a delicate necklace of the same hue and workmanship set off the dazzling whiteness of her perfect neck. Had Mrs. Bryanstone only acquired new science in making her face up, or had nature indeed lavished more charms upon her in the last six months? Probably the former. But in this friendly light, what mattered it if dew of Sahara and Sultana salve, if henna and belladonna had played their part in that radiant complexion and those melting eyes, if copper-filings had increased the gold of that cloud of supple, silky hair, or not? The picture, whether painted by the master-hand or by her own, was a beautiful one—beautiful with luscious colouring, with flowing lines, with Mechlin lace, with a smalt-blue silk, with Indian gold!—and remember, Nelly knew nothing about meretricious art or Madame

Rachel, also that she had come out of the cold and darkness of the wintry streets, and was looking with blinded, jealous, dazzled eyes, at the woman who had stolen her love away from her!

"Am I—am I expected?" she stammered, standing like a stone at the open door, and with her small *chétif* face looking literally all eyes in its bewilderment and misery.

"Dear Miss Bertram!" exclaimed Honoria, jumping up, and her face assuming the right expression in an instant. "Dear Nelly! So good, so very good of you! Sit down by the fire—your hands are frozen," seizing both of them within her own, "and let me get you something. A cup of hot tea would be the very best thing for you to take after your journey!"

"Is Mr. Bryanstone better?" said Nelly, when she had allowed herself to be led up to the fire. "But I need hardly ask?" And she glanced at Mrs. Bryanstone's guest, who, with that mingled air of deference and easy good-nature which distinguishes foreigners from ourselves in all the small situations of life, had quietly arranged a chair and footstool for her by the fireside, and now stood looking at her face as though her condition after her journey was really a matter of positive personal interest to himself.

Mrs. Bryanstone clasped her hands and cast her eyes up to the ceiling, on which was painted a very florid representation of Rubens-like loves and graces. "Thank Heaven!" she murmured, after invoking these deities for a minute in silence,— "thank Heaven, I may say that the worst is over! This afternoon the doctor pronounced him out of danger. But you must expect to see him changed, dear Miss Bertram, changed, and oh, how fearfully—fearfully weak!"

She made a demonstration of a sob; then thought the better of it—influenced, I doubt not, by a certain look in dear Miss Bertram's eyes, and rang the bell instead, to give orders for Nelly's tea.

"And when am I to see him?" the girl asked, wistfully. "Does he ask for me still? Would he wish to see me to-night?"

"Well, what do you think, Count?" said Mrs. Bryanstone, addressing the Frenchman. "You saw Doctor Véron just before dinner, and heard what he said. Do you think it

would be running any risk to tell Henry that Miss Bertram has arrived?"

The gentleman thus addressed thought there would be not only no risk in doing so, but great benefit to the patient. The only name, as he understood, that Mr. Bryanstone had mentioned was Mademoiselle's—the only subject that had had power to interest him had been the probability of her arrival to-night.

He looked politely towards Nelly while he spoke; and then Mrs. Bryanstone recollected to introduce her two young friends. "The Count St. Georges, Miss Bertram."

"The Count is an old friend, an old childish playfellow, indeed, of mine," she explained, looking into the fire as she spoke, "and, by a perfect providence, happened to be in Brussels now. He has done everything for me—put my poor Henry into the hands of the best doctors, managed the horrible police affair—everything!"

But Miss Bertram had no interest in the Count or his old acquaintance with Honoria. "You do think Mr. Bryanstone will be able to see me to-night?" she recommenced, curtly, after swallowing her tea and listening to a good deal more of well-done sentiment about my poor dear Henry. "May I go to him at once?"

Mrs. Bryanstone rang again, and desired the foreign servant, who answered the bell, to send Mr. Bryanstone's valet to the dining-room.

"When you are once in Martin's hands, Nelly dear, I shall feel that I have nothing more to do with you," she remarked, playfully. "Martin regards his master as his own especial personal property, and everybody else who cares for him, me in particular, as interlopers. If I offer to give the poor fellow his medicine or drink, Martin takes the glass out of my hand and looks at me as if I was a Lucretia Borgia, at the least. It will be well if he does not treat you in the same way."

Before she had finished speaking the door opened noiselessly, and a grave, middle-aged, and unmistakably British man-servant appeared.

"Mr. Bryanstone is ready to see Miss Bertram," he announced, much in the same tone in which the familiars, attired as butlers, summon expectant martyrs to the dentist's



inner place of torture. "Mr. Bryanstone would be glad to see Miss Bertram at once." And then, without another word, he signed to Nelly, whose heart beat as fast as any martyr's in any faith, to follow him, and marshalled her along winding passages and up innumerable stairs to quite a distant part of the vast hotel.

"Miss Bertram, if you please," he remarked, when he had stopped before a door which Nelly's quickened pulse told her was that of Bryanstone's room, "I want to say a word to you."

She only looked her answer; for, indeed, just at that moment she could not bring her lips to speak.

"Mr. Bryanstone is very ill indeed, miss. *They* make light of it;" indicating whom "they" meant by a contemptuous glance down the staircase they had just ascended, "and say the worst's over, and all the rest of it. But he's very ill, miss, and the doctors—for all they're foreigners—say so too. And he can't bear excitement, nor rustling silks, nor chatter of no kind, and that's why I've got him to this room, quiet and away from Mrs. Bryanstone's apartments. I hope you won't take my meaning different to what it's meant, but I speak for my master's good. With the wound as it is now, a sudden excitement of any kind might be the death of him."

As Nelly listened to the man's funereal voice, her face got whiter, if that indeed were possible, than it had been before. "I understand you perfectly," she answered. "You are right to tell me, and you needn't fear that I shall excite Mr. Bryanstone."

Then, with trembling hands, she took off her hat and cloak, smoothed back the hair from her forehead, paused one moment to try and stop the desperate beat of her own heart, and silently followed Martin into his master's room.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

## DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

"No, no, no. You don't understand Englishwomen," said Mrs. Bryanstone. "No foreigner can. She will simply act out the part with Henry that I intend her to do, and then I shall send her back."

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders, but looked thoroughly unconvinced. "You probably don't think her in love with him?" he remarked, laconically. "I do. No woman ever looked as that girl did when she asked for your husband unless she was in love, or, which is worse, believed herself to be so. Les Miss Anglaises are human creatures, I suppose, with all their virtues?"

"Well, yes," answered Honoria, coolly; "human creatures certainly, but with a difference, with a great difference, Jacques. Not such human creatures, at all events, as you've had anything to do with. The girl, now, has principles—oh, you may smile, but there *is* such a thing, mind, as ultra-scepticism—fixed principles in a whole heap of things,—religion, honour, domestic affections, and a great deal besides. I know the whole list of ruling motives such people have, and instead of sneering at them like you, I use my sense, and say these things are. Let me make the best of them. That girl knew enough to damage me with Bryanstone before my marriage, and held her tongue. Why? Because she was over head and ears in love with him herself, and the principles ticketed 'delicacy' and 'self-respect' prevented her from injuring her rival."

The Count adjusted one of the fire-logs with the heel of his exquisitely-fitting laced boot, stroked down his moustache, and smiled,—but with his eyes only. He had an enormous respect for Honoria's ability as long as she kept down to his level; but his mind, praiseworthy as was its capacity for all commonplace villany, had not in reality a tenth part of the

scope of hers, and the moment she got above him he sneered at her want of sense,—as many other men are apt to do at women cleverer than themselves. Honoria could take a character, recognise its honour and its virtue frankly, and work upon them for her own advantage. He could recognise the existence neither of honour nor of virtue, and so was immeasurably more limited in the use to which he could put their possessors.

“Nita,” he exclaimed, after a moment or two—in French, of course—“let us put sentiment quite aside, and look to plain facts as if we were mere curious spectators of the scene. Here you have”—he lowered his voice and looked full at her unblenching face—“an adventuress who, by the extraordinary whim of one old woman of fashion, has risen—we speak as ‘respectable’ people speak—from one of the very lowest walks of life into the society of church-going, and, what is more, of well-born and well-to-do men and women. Her protectress—mistress—whatever you choose to call her—dies, leaving her the sum of two thousand pounds, with which capital this woman—this adventuress—keeps herself still afloat in London society, biding her time till she can make some new fool her prey. The fool comes. She meets a man who is—well, sufficiently in love to want to make her his wife, allures him on almost to the point, then loses her hold of him, some rumours of the past having unfortunately penetrated into the refined circles where she moves. After a time this woman meets her prey again. By playing the last, most desperate stroke of all, flinging herself at his feet at the door of his own house (if I understood that part of the story right), she marries him. Well, what follows? Before six months are over, a hundred dear friends have whispered into the husband’s ear suspicions of his wife’s past life. Before six months are over, he has—possessing, we will assume, more sensibility than sense—fought a duel and got desperately wounded in his defence of her honour. Now comes the point. The wife does not believe her beloved Henry will die, and with reason; for she has had satisfactory assurances from the first surgeons in Europe on the point: but she has another, if I mistake not, a deeper anxiety. The husband will live and mistrust her! Certain words, certain gestures of the wounded man have told her *that*, and clearly as a woman of her ability needs to be told anything. What will be his

course of conduct when he recovers? Will he indeed inquire into that dark past, and see what materials for a divorce its history unfolds, or will he separate from her silently and without the help of law? allowing her his tarnished name and a certain number of hundreds a year for her portion. She knows nothing of this. She waits patiently, day by day, and not trusted sufficiently by her husband's own valet to offer a cup of water to his lips——"

"Jacques!" cried Honoria, starting up in one of the moments of passion that were so rare to her, and being rare, so intense while they lasted. "Don't go too far! Don't dare look in my face and say too many of these infamies! You'd better not! Men don't get on well who say infamies of me, my little Jacques! Do you remember Molinos? and Bernadin? and young De Loulay?"

The Frenchman looked quietly into the fire for a minute or two, then took out a cigar-case from his pocket, selected one of its contents, and bit its end off with his little white square teeth.

"I remember them all quite well," he answered, with a smile. "Molinos and De Loulay you got murdered in duels. The other, Bernadin, you sold to the police. Well, the first two were lads, both of them fellows with hearts on their sleeves when they first met you, free-tongued concerning you after they had been ruined. I'm nothing of that kind, you know, am I?" and he leant his arm upon the mantelpiece, and resting his head upon it, gazed placidly, almost affectionately, into her face.

They were a beautiful picture so. I don't speak here about their moral deformities. I mean outwardly and artistically. Honoria in her shining silk, and Mechlin lace, and yellow Indian gold, and with the firelight flashing on her auburn hair and heaving breast; the Frenchman leaning with indolent grace against the crimson velvet mantelpiece, looking at her with his mocking smile, and carelessly playing with the unlighted cigar in his left hand. By madame's kind permission he was not *en toilette*, and his black velvet morning suit admirably set off his clear-cut oval face and chestnut beard and hair. Giorgione or Titian might have painted them as they stood, in this voluptuous wax-light, and with the curtained room, and costly wines and fruits upon the table, as accessories, and I don't think the critic among us all who talks most about

beauty in art being the outward manifestation of beauty hidden in the soul, would have cavilled at the picture.

"I'm like neither of those two lads you put out of the way," the count proceeded, calmly. "Still less am I like Bernadin, who was connected to you, madame, by nearer and dearer ties than any with which I can ever hope to be bound; and instead of saying infamies of you, I say truths to you. You look so handsome when you lose your temper, Nita, that I only wonder you do it so rarely; but the present is really quite an ill-chosen time for trying the effect. In the first place, no new expression could make me think you handsomer than I already do; in the second—my poor little Nita! why should we quarrel? What object could I have in injuring you? Have I not your interests at heart to an extent which I might almost say makes them my interests too?"

She sat down again without a word, and looked sullenly away from him. In alluding to the mistrust of her husband's servant, the Frenchman had, knowingly, touched—shall I say her heart? shall I say her conscience?—well, had touched what to herself passed for self-respect, in its sorest part. She would not have injured a hair of Bryanstone's head. She wanted Bryanstone to live. To be suspected of the senseless crime of injuring the man who gave her money, name, reputation, stirred in her a sense of actual passionate injustice, such as it was very rare for her contained, cold temperament to sustain. But the Count St. Georges was right. What good for them to quarrel? What good for her to show temper to *him*? She sat down sullenly, as I have said, and after studying her downcast face keenly for a minute or two, the Count proceeded—

"We wont dwell upon unpleasant details, Nita. We'll finish, in a few words, the scene at which you and I are looking as impartial spectators. The husband lies in a precarious condition, certainly, but convalescent. A few weeks at most, say two of the best surgeons in Europe, and he will be abroad again, fit to think, fit to act. At this juncture, when all her future life hangs upon her retaining her power over her husband (whom in her soul she suspects of not believing in her), what does the woman in whom we are interested do? Writes to England for a former rival, an old friend, love, mistress—*que sais-je*?—of the husband, and makes over the place in the sick room that should be hers exclusively to this stranger! So

much of the little drama is all that we can at present see ; but it needs no great acuteness—no great acuteness, by —— !” cried the Count, waxing earnest, “to foretell the end. Mr. Bryanstone has been set upon the right track, and if a link is wanting in the chain of evidence, if a doubt in your favour yet lingers in his mind, this woman will supply the one and destroy the other, as only a woman can. When you told me you had written for a friend, I expected to see an aunt, a mother, a partisan of yours at least ; instead of that arrives a girl of eighteen, not pretty, but none the less dangerous for that ; a girl of eighteen over head and ears in love with your husband, and hating and suspecting you like the devil. You’ve overshoot the mark, madame, as you will find before very long !” And he lit his cigar and began to smoke it with short, vindictive, unenjoyed puffs, which told Honoria, more than his words did, how much he was in earnest.

“And I answer, as I did at first, no. You know nothing of Englishwomen generally, or of this one in particular,” she remarked, in her usual placid tone. “If the girl had wanted to injure me with Bryanstone, she would have done it already, by repeating either the details of a conversation of mine and Stretton’s that she chanced to overhear once, or some of the things which, as she did not fail to inform me, I let fall concerning my old life during my fever. Having been silent then, she will be silent now ; more than silent, she’ll think it a point of honour, while she lives under my roof, to lessen any breach that may exist between Bryanstone and me. I see the expression of your face, and I know what you think, but you may allow, at least, that I have also acted as I was obliged to act. I’ve told you, have I not, the reception Bryanstone gave me when I arrived ? He wasn’t able to speak then, but the excited sort of horror he fell into whenever I entered his room was so great, that the doctors said they would not answer for the case if it was repeated—softening it off, of course,” Mrs. Bryanstone added, laughing, “by saying that sick people often took those morbid dislikes to those they loved, *et cetera*. Well, two or three days later, he made them understand he wanted to write. When he had with difficulty written three or four indistinct lines, begging this girl Nelly to come here, I was sent for. He put the note into my hand, and when I had read it, asked me, in spite of the surgeon’s injunctions to silence, if I would address it for him, as he had forgotten the name of

the village where she lived. I promised, not only to address it, but to add a letter of my own to one of her friends, imploring that she might be sent, and I did so. Could I do otherwise?"

The Frenchman looked as if he did not see the necessity.

"You must remember one thing, Jacques," she went on in her clear concise manner, "I don't want Mr. Bryanstone to die. You understand that perfectly?"

"I do. The chance of succeeding to the title, and of being found out! sooner than the certainty of a good provision, and bearing the plain name of Mrs. Bryanstone, now. It is like you, Nita. You always flew at the biggest game—no matter what risk you ran."

"And hitherto have not failed to bring it down," she added. "We needn't talk of all that now! Knowing that my wish is for Bryanstone's recovery, can you say I acted ill in asking this girl? The doctors said he was to be irritated in nothing; and you know as well as I do how he's been chafing and fretting about her non-arrival."

"All that is nothing—a sick man's fancy, nothing more. The real danger for you will be in this girl's power over him as he recovers. If you had only an ordinary woman's heart, an ordinary woman's jealousy, you would see the risk better than you do, with all your sharp brains, my poor Nita! You are standing on the brink of a volcano!"

"On the brink of it!" She rose, and laid her steady hand upon the young man's arm. "Jacques, to another woman those words might convey a sense of danger or fear: to me they are nothing. On the *brink* of a volcano! On what else have my feet trod during the last three years? Have I ever known a day, an hour, in which detection in some shape was not hovering, now distant, now near, before my sight? Since I married Bryanstone, have I ever risen in the morning without thinking that before night I might be discovered, dishonoured, turned out of his house? While you live, while Stretton lives, while I live myself, can I ever say that I am for an hour safe? Stretton I may some day be unable to buy off. You," her voice for a moment seemed to tremble, "Jacques, may think it to your interest to betray me! I may have fever again, and betray myself, as I so nearly did before. And even beyond these nearer chances, there are other people whom I have forgotten (Farnham Lumley even, if this first lesson has not been strong enough to ensure his silence) who

may turn up any day and recognise me. I've looked straight at all this for years, and the result of it is that I never feel more afraid at one time than at another. I'm getting to believe in fate, I think. Mr. Bryanstone's present temper seems an ominous one, but I've been in worse passes than this, and got well through them all. And discovery can come but once; and do you know, Jacques, sometimes—to-night, for instance—when I feel out of sorts, or down on my luck in any way, I think I'll be just as well off when it does come! I ask myself whether the game is worth the candle. Respectability is a nice thing, and position is good, and money better than either, but I'm not sure I wasn't happier, hard work and starvation and all, in the old, old days when you and I were children together, Jacques. Do you remember how we used to keep St. Catherine's day? Do you remember how we held our ball—poor hungry little wretches that we were! during the first act of 'Robert?' A ball in a room fifteen feet square, and with one cracked violin for orchestra! We'd never more than twenty sous between us, you and I, and when the grown men and women stood drinking their punch and eating their galettes, all we could get was a few roasted chestnuts, or a glass of cassis and a brioche. But after the rest were gone, we used to 'collect'—don't you remember?—grobe about under the table for whatever other people had thrown away as uneatable—apple peelings, burnt bits of galette, orange peel, bad nuts; and I used to keep them in my pocket, Jacques (for you couldn't be trusted), till the next Sunday we could get away beyond the barrier to anything that we called 'country,' and then we used to sit down and bring out each a piece of dry bread, and I the 'collection,' and think it a fête! How clear it all rises before me at this moment!"

And she turned from him, something like actual emotion on her face.

The Frenchman's manner remained coolly indifferent as ever; but his dark eyes followed her keenly, jealously, suspiciously, from beneath their long lashes. Her intention of utilizing Nelly's good faith he could, to a certain extent, believe in, even while he laughed at the existence of the good faith itself. But what did it portend to him, St. Georges, when Mrs. Bryanstone poséed for sentiment? What plot to silence his lips was brooding when she could thus speak tenderly of old times, calmly of the possibility of discovery?



He thought of her manner to Molinos, and to young De Loulay upon the eve of each of *their* betrayals!

"Your recollections of the past do your heart credit, *ma petite Nita*," he remarked, indifferently. "I honour you for speaking of a poverty most women would wish forgotten. For the rest, you certainly do well always to stand prepared for the worst. As you say, any day may bring up some unexpected witness against you. It is not perfectly certain, is it, that Bernadin, even, is dead?"

Her lips quivered for a moment; and a moment only. "Bernadin knows no more than Stretton, or than you," she said, looking unflinching into his face. "As long as one of you lives it doesn't matter to me about the rest. And Bernadin, or Stretton, or you, may each do his worst when he will!" she added, after a moment. "I don't know what fear is, Jacques! It would be well for some men if they could say the same!"

The Count was no coward. In that she wronged him. But a cold, instinctive shudder did, nevertheless, come across him as he walked away from the hotel, and recollected the expression of Mrs. Bryanstone's eyes as he had twice seen them that night. Once when she threatened him, once when she softened over the past.

He knew both those expressions well. Whenever that woman grew passionate or tender, some man's ruin was in active preparation.

Whose was it now?

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## ON THE TRACK.

"DRAW the blind higher—I can bear any quantity of light now—and come and sit by me; so. It's almost worth being ill to be allowed to talk again, and sit so peacefully in the sunshine with you, Nelly."

And Bryanstone held out a hand, so white, so wasted, that it was not in her heart to refuse to take it, to his little nurse.

She had been his nurse for six weeks now. He had had two serious relapses since the night of Miss Bertram's arrival, and only during the last ten days had progressed so steadily as to set his attendant's fears thoroughly at rest. During these six weeks Nelly had waited upon him constantly—waited upon him with the untiring strength, the perfect tact, the exquisite patience that only great love teaches; and now—now was her reward! Bryanstone was saved; and she, when another few days were over, would return to her own rightful, legitimate duties, and leave him to the possession of Honoria.

Do you wonder her face was thinner and whiter than ever? Do you wonder that even amidst the exquisite pleasure of sitting beside him once more in the sunshine, her eyes would fill with furtive, foolish tears, as she tried hard to talk to him cheerfully about himself, and about his prospects of returning health?

"You have made more progress in the last two days than in all the six weeks before," she remarked, going through a little pantomime of feeling his pulse, in order to be able to take her hand from his afterwards. "Honoria and I were saying so this morning."

"Oh!" and Bryanstone's face darkened. "Honoria discusses my state with you, does she? She knows a great deal about it, I should think."

"Honorina watches you much more than you know of," said Nelly, quickly. "A dozen times a day I have found her standing patiently at the door, waiting to hear if we saw any change for the better. A dozen times she has come and watched by you when you slept, or were unconscious of her presence. I like Honorina as much and as little as ever, Mr. Bryanstone; but I won't be unjust to her. She has not been indifferent to your recovery. That she hasn't been with you more rests with yourself, you know. You never wanted to have her near you."

For a minute a flush rose up over Bryanstone's pale face, and the stern lines, never absent at any time, about his mouth and jaw, deepened. Then he remarked—Nelly thought with somewhat affected carelessness—"O, Mrs. Bryanstone's place is not in a sick-room. The first time she came in to see me she overturned a table, two chairs, and all the medicine-bottles, with her expanse of gorgeous silk; and I vowed inwardly that she shouldn't approach me again. Nelly,"—looking into her face,—"Heaven meant you for a nurse. My instinct was not at fault when I longed so feverishly to have you with me. When I was at my worst you touched me as lightly as you would have touched a wounded bird, and yet with a firm calm hold, that gave me an infinite sense of support and tenderness at once. Do you wear habiliments like other women? I suppose so. I see no difference between your appearance and theirs; and yet you never overturn furniture, or sweep papers and letters out of one's reach, as they do. You are always the same—gentle, patient, firm, enduring. What a happy man Uncle Frank ought to be."

The blood rushed to Nelly's heart. She was not worldly-wise enough to think—"It is very easy for Mr. Bryanstone to pay Miss Bertram fine compliments now! When it was in his power to have her, to rob Uncle Frank of the priceless treasure, he did not do it. He chose Miss Forrester." She only thought how good it was to be with him, to hear him acknowledge her poor services, to see his eyes fixed with that look of tender gratitude upon her face. Nothing tones down a very young girl's passion into apparent friendship like nursing the man she loves in illness. Of course it is there, ready to break out with all the old strength again hereafter; but for the time the sense of utter weakness on his side, of protection on hers: the perfect, unquestioned familiarity, the constant

companionship, have done away all the old reserve, and doubt, and mystery, which to unsophisticated young women is the very food of love. In her constant attendance by day, in her long watches by night, in her anxiety, in her thankfulness, Nelly had almost forgotten the kind of way in which she had once loved Bryanstone. He was her care, her possession, her weak, pain-struck, often querulous patient. No longer the enshrined divinity she had once made of him. No longer the object of hopeless, despairing worship, to which, ever since his marriage, her foolish heart had been faithful.

"Uncle Frank is a very discontented man just at present, Mr. Bryanstone. He cannot at all see why I ought to be here nursing you, instead of making his tea. And he is right," with a stifled sigh. "Next week I must go home again. You are convalescent. You will do just as well without as with me now."

"Nelly, I shall do very badly without you."

"I hope—I believe not, sir. Monsieur Véron says he has not the faintest fear of another relapse."

"O, I don't mean bodily," said Bryanstone, with the unmistakable impatience of a sick man. "I mean mentally, *really*. Nelly, look at me. You didn't see me till after my accident, and you think, I dare say, that all the lines you see on my face, all the grey hairs on my head," and he passed his thin hand through his hair, which was indeed fast turning from the glossy black Nelly remembered, to iron-grey, "have sprung from illness alone. No such thing. I was an utterly changed man before—changed, embittered, and so nearly desperate as to be drawn into fighting this accursed duel; a folly which I would once have sworn fifty worthless women should not have forced me to commit! Poor little girl," he broke off, in answer to the scared look of her face, "what should I talk of these things to you for? What do you know of them? You have nursed me beautifully, Nelly. You shall go back to Uncle Frank. What right have I to try and keep you?"

"Mr. Bryanstone, I'd do anything I could for you. If you and Honoria really wish it, I will stay longer."

"Honoria!" exclaimed Bryanstone, between his set teeth, and in a tone that made any further comment needless. "If Honoria wanted you to stay, for that very reason I would bid

you go. Our—no, I won't use the word—her roof and mine isn't a fit shelter for a child like you. You shall go, and she and I will live out our life, together or apart, as best we can."

He folded his arms across his chest, and with hard-set lips sat and watched the cold pink clouds as they floated slowly across the ice-blue winter sky. "Do you remember the last evening you walked with me in the garden of Lowick Place?" he said at last. "It was the day her fever turned."

Yes; Nelly remembered the time he spoke of very well.

"I had a strange sort of fore-knowledge of what I was going to do that evening, Nelly. Not by reason, of course, or I should have kept out of it, but by instinct. I knew that a fair and modest English violet was within my reach, and I did not gather it! I chose instead a flaunting exotic, without odour, without beauty, beyond the outward beauty that makes the senses drunk for a week; and now I reap the bitter fruits of my choice!"

"Mr. Bryanstone," said Nelly, simply, "I don't wonder at your choice. It's very kind of you to compare me to a violet, or to anything that's pretty; but in plain fact I was, as I am now, an ugly, unmannered country girl, while Honoria——"

"Honoria!" interrupted Bryanstone, hotly. "Don't you try to say what Honoria is, for you don't know; nor indeed, for the matter of that, do I! We will leave the discussion of her virtues alone; but I'll tell you a little, Nelly, of what my position as her husband is. Imagine a vain sensitive man, who has been horribly and recently disfigured by small-pox. Out of pity, no mirror has been brought to his room as yet. All that he knows for certain of his misfortune he gleans from the pitying shuddering looks of his old friends, when they come to visit him; and still, with the desperate fatuity—call it by its true name, rather—with the desperate cowardice of human nature, he delays day by day to look at himself straight in a glass, and know the worst. If the horrible shock to self-love *must* come in the end, let it be staved off, he thinks, only another day, only another hour. Let him think of himself as he was when he was like other men. Nelly, that pleasant simile not unaptly sets forth what my life has become to me."

"I don't understand you," said Nelly, looking at him with wistful pitying eyes. "I am very stupid at guessing the meaning of such things."

"Understand! No; how should you? Poor little girl, what do you know of the very air I draw my daily breath in? Would you like to know anything of it, do you think?" He went on presently, "When you are learning your Greek and Latin of a summer's morning at home, will it make your quiet studies more tasteful, by contrast, to know that you have once read one living page out of the dark book called life?"

"I should like to know everything about you, sir. Insignificant though I am, I might be able in some way to lessen your burden to you, perhaps."

"Not very likely, that, Nelly. It's a burden for life, none the less hard to bear because self-imposed; but I think it would relieve me somewhat to talk to you awhile about myself. Do you know you are very near to me, Nelly, my little friend? Nearer than mother, sister, or any woman I've thought I loved has ever been. I told you that once before, did I not?"

"You did, Mr. Bryanstone, on that evening when it was first evident to me you were going to marry Miss Forrester."

"Ah, you are right; you are sensible, Nelly, when you speak in that tone. You recal to me exactly the position in which I stand to you and to her. I can give you a sketch of my married happiness quite calmly now. The evening when it was first evident to you I would marry Miss Forrester—I never saw anything of you after that evening, you know—you went away from Lowick Place next day. What a fine evening it was, Miss Nelly! Do you remember? You stayed with me there in the twilight till——"

"Yes, I remember all about it," interrupted Nelly, who was just beginning to remember also that Bryanstone was a sick man no longer. "It belongs to a bygone time, and one there's no use in our recalling now. I would rather not talk about myself or the old time in Norfolk at all, please."

"Very well. We will talk of me and of my bride, instead, Nelly. In the first months of my marriage I was not acutely miserable—mind that;—not acutely. That she did not interest me—that we had not a thought or a feeling in common—that, physically and mentally alike, we were unsympathetic,

were not sufficient causes to render me so. I don't say what I might be now, but when I married her I really was not the sort of man whose happiness depends upon domestic congeniality. I've never been much accustomed to women's society. That my wife should have cared for balls and operas, and running about after titled people, would rather have suited me, so long as she left me in peace to follow my own pursuits. All men who pass thirty unmarried are apt to be the same," Bryanstone remarked, in answer to the expression which this frightful avowal called forth on Nelly's face, "and Honoria had quite tact enough to suit herself to my habits. As far as character goes, we could probably have got on as well as ninety-nine husbands and wives out of a hundred get on (that is, not at all," he added, in a grim parenthesis), "had not far graver doubts than the common one of whether we suited each other or not been suddenly forced upon my mind.

"I believe I must have mentioned my uncle, Sir Hyde Bryanstone, to you, Nelly—my uncle of sixty-five, who is a younger man than I am, and *au courant* of every public and almost every private individual's history in Europe. He has been living chiefly at home, in Somersetshire, nursing his gout during the last year, and had never been introduced to Honoria till I took her there, in December last, for a bridal visit. I was going to say he had never seen Honoria; but that takes away the point of the story. Sir Hyde Bryanstone swore—swears now, that he knew her face perfectly. Her face? nay!" cried out Bryanstone, fiercely, "as I'm telling it at all, why do I compromise?—that he knew the very gesture of her hands, the very turn of her neck, the very trick of the smile that had once been part of her profession. On the first day of our arrival, my uncle had the goodness to inform me, as I and my brother-in-law sat alone with him after dinner, that I had married a ballet-dancer. He did not care how I got introduced to Miss Forrester, or what her history was, or who would vouch for her. He knew, he would swear, that he had seen that woman dance at the Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin, in Paris, during the year fifty——; eight years, that is to say, before she became my wife. Of the name under which she was introduced to me he had never heard. The name under which the woman who had just left his

table used to dance in Paris was 'Nita.' He would swear to it."

A cold shudder passed through Nelly Bertram's heart. "Nita" was the name that Stretton had, more than once, called Honoria by during that midnight conversation, every word of which she remembered still. In her delirium had she not talked of herself now as crowned with flowers, now surrounded with applauding faces, now hissed by a thousand cruel voices from some scene where she had once been triumphant? "How did you act?" she stammered. "You gave Honoria the chance of defending herself, and it was explained? Some accidental resemblance——"

"Nelly," interrupted Bryanstone, gravely, "I am not a man to resort to such half measures as putting a woman on her own defence—above all, a woman like Honoria—in a matter such as this. I thanked my uncle with tolerable temper for his information, and that night. . . . No, child, no!" he interrupted himself, turning his face away from her. "This part of the story is not for you. It can be made plain enough without that darkest link of all in my suspicions. The next morning I started for London, leaving Honoria to visit some people she said she knew at Reading on the road.

"I don't know whether she suspected anything from my abrupt departure. I don't enter, or attempt to enter, into her thoughts, any more than I attempt to judge her by her looks or words now! She talked a good deal as we travelled up from Somersetshire of her old girlish days—not a usual subject with her—especially of her long, wearying years of work, as governess in a school before she became the companion of Mrs. Forsyth. From the time she was sixteen until she was twenty-three; seven monotonous years—including, mark, the precise date of which Sir Hyde had spoken—she had scarcely once been out, save to church; scarcely seen a carriage, save the doctor's. What would the dear old Misses Jarvis say at now seeing her a fine lady, and the possessor of all the carriages and horses that her dear Henry—this was addressed to my brother-in-law, who travelled with us—was going to give her, *et cetera*.

"I listened, Nelly, and answered nothing. Monstrous as Sir Hyde Bryanstone's assertion might seem, his own intense



conviction of its truth had influenced me more than I dared to acknowledge to myself. Had it been a lighter charge, I might possibly have taken it differently; but the very magnitude of the dishonour that hung over me kept me quiet, almost stunned. I parted from her as usual at the Reading station, and then went on to London with Richard Fairfax to prosecute my search—for I need not tell you of another mission whose result has been to throw me a helpless wounded man upon your charity so long, Nelly!

"What a search it was! A man who, till yesterday, had held his head up honourably among his peers, going by stealth in quest of his own shame, the details of his own, or, as men hold it, worse, of his wife's dishonoured past!

"Poor little girl," he broke off, as the great tears rose in Nelly's pitying eyes, "don't look so intensely miserable! No man ever died of grief any more than I shall! Besides, what I am going to tell you is only the preface, the prelude, to the story. The story itself is being acted out now. Time enough to grieve, Nelly, when we come to the catastrophe. An event which, God grant, may not be very far distant!" added Bryanstone, bitterly.

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"I had no hesitation as to the manner of carrying out my inquiries," he went on, after a minute or two of silence. "The leading fact to be proved was this. Where did Honoria Forrester live during the years spoken of by Sir Hyde Bryanstone? The old ladies from whose hands she passed into the charge of Mrs. Forsyth were, obviously, the persons to whom I must first address myself; and on arriving in London I at once set to work to find them out. Honoria had accidentally, or otherwise, informed me during our journey to town that they now lived in Guilford Street; but on calling there, I found them, as I more than suspected, gone; and it took me several hours before I could trace them to their new abode at Brixton. A feeling I can't explain told me that, if Honoria was guilty, these women, in some way or other, would be her accomplices, and yet my first look at old Miss Jarvis, when she came into the room to receive me, made my confidence in her complete. She was a venerable old woman, silver-haired, quiet-spoken, subdued; a woman whom you could not look at and suspect of confederacy in such a plot as the one I sought to unravel. She made me a frightened, old-fashioned cour-

tey as she entered, apologized for having kept me—I had waited about a minute and a half—informed me her sister Jane would be down directly, then seated herself upon the extreme verge of a chair opposite me, and began uttering mild little didactic commonplaces, as I doubt not she had been in the habit of doing with the parents of her pupils, upon the state of the clouds, and the prospect of more rain before night.

“‘Madam,’ I said, bluntly, ‘I am pressed for time, and I have come here to ask you a question of singular importance to myself and another person. Excuse me if I ask it abruptly. Was Honoria Forrester under your charge from the year 184—to 185—, or was she not?’

“‘Honoria Forrester!’ she exclaimed, looking at me, I thought, with terrified eyes, as though I must have some bad motive to cover by this sudden question. ‘Certainly, certainly. She was under my charge for seven years, sir; until, indeed, my sister’s health forced us to give up our school, and then she went to our dear friend, Mrs. Forsyth. Did I,’ and she rubbed her hands together with unmistakeable eager nervousness, ‘know anything of Honoria Forrester now?’

“I answered, drily enough, I should think that I did know something about her, and that Miss Forrester was well, and married. And I then put the following sufficiently point-blank question: Was Miss Forrester’s conduct invariably good during the time that she lived in Miss Jarvis’s establishment?

“Nelly, if the old woman had thrown up her hands and gone into ecstasies, I should have doubted her, as I do all theatrical demonstrations; but she did nothing of the kind. The question, in a certain sense, did not even seem to take her by surprise. Miss Forrester was by no means a perfect character, she answered. She had been vilely brought up as a child, and her temper was originally and radically bad. Her good qualities lay in her patience, and in the resolution with which she set herself to master any subject, either for herself or her pupils, to which she had once made up her mind. She was never loved by the children, neither did she love them, or open out much to her superiors.

“‘As far as conduct goes,’ added the old lady, in a calm, business-like way, ‘the rules of the house only admitted of

good conduct. During the seven years Miss Forrester lived with us, she had not more than half-a-dozen holidays, and the vacation she spent at school."

"And you doubted any longer?" cried Nelly, warmly. "Mr. Bryanstone, did you require further proof after this?"

"Yes, Nelly, I sought for, and obtained, further proof. Up to that day my bride's portrait hung in a little locket from my watch-chain. The sentimental relic, a present from her soon after my marriage, had its use now. When the other Miss Jarvis entered the room, and before her sister had opened her lips, I took the locket from my chain, and put it into the hands of the younger sister, remarking simply, at the same time, that I had come to speak to her about one of her old friends.

"'Honoriam Forrester!' she exclaimed, in a moment. 'Honoriam—but how much improved! Sister, have you seen?'

"They compared notes over the photograph together, one thinking their dearest Honoriam so much improved, the other so much aged, by having got stout; but their recognition of the likeness was indisputable. I have seen too much of human beings, I think, to mistake any genuine bit of nature for acting. These women recognised in my wife's photograph the likeness of the pupil-governess, Miss Forrester, who had lived daily, hourly, under their sight for more than seven years. I had stronger evidence still as to the likeness being a good one. The old servant who had opened the house door came into the room with coals at this moment, and the younger Miss Jarvis put the locket, without saying a word, into her hands.

"'Gracious, Miss Jane,' she cried, 'why here's Mamselle again.' Honoriam had always told me she passed as 'Mamselle' among the children and servants. 'Mamselle Onore, as natural as ever I seen her, only a little stouter—stouter and more the lady like, as is natural.'

"And then she too joined hotly in the argument as to whether Mamselle had improved or not. 'For certain, she ain't ashamed of her red hair as she used to be!' she remarked, pointing out the frizzled masses, the falling curls in which Mrs. Bryanstone had chosen to be taken. 'I mind when she used to grease it and plait it all up as tight as she could plait it to her head for fear of the children calling her "carrots;"

but I'm told red hair's the fashion now, and Mamselle always dearly loved to follow that.'

"Now, I am certain that Honoria's hair was never red. Red hair may change to auburn, or to black; never to yellow. But she had often told me not only how in her youth, she and others had called her hair brick-dust, but how she had oiled and plastered it in her hopes of getting rid of the imputation. The old servant's remark identified her more thoroughly therefore with 'Mamselle' than the Misses Jarvis had done. When I left the house I felt the result of my visit to be this: I had the testimony of three separate, unbiassed witnesses as to my wife's portrait being the portrait of the Honoria Forrester who once lived in Miss Jarvis's school; and I had the direct and positive assurance of Miss Jarvis herself as to Honoria Forrester never once leaving her protection between the years of 184— and 185—; while, on the other side, was the bare, unsupported assertion of one individual that my wife, formerly Honoria Forrester, had been a public ballet-dancer in Paris at precisely the same date.

"I don't say my mind was set at rest," went on Bryanstone, "but it was certainly rid of the greater part of its burden when I returned to my hotel to dinner. That Honoria's past life was free from mystery—that *all* she had told me respecting it was true, I did not think; for other testimony than Sir Hyde's was busy in my mind against her. That it was fully possible that Sir Hyde's special accusation against her was unfounded, I did think; and I was mentally revolving words in which I should inform him of my opinion, when one of the waiters entered my room and delivered to me a letter directed in Sir Hyde Bryanstone's hand. This letter you shall see."

And Bryanstone rose, walked feebly to the table, and, after some delay, produced a letter from one of the drawers of his dressing-case. "Here it is, Nelly," he said, "lying—what a queer juxtaposition—under one of the little notes I had from you at Lowick! Stay, I'll make it out for you. Sir Hyde's handwriting is the only thing about him that is not mathematically precise." And Bryanstone, after getting back into his easy-chair, read aloud as follows:—

"MY DEAR HENRY,—I am afraid you were hipped by what I told you last night. Many men would take a more

philosophical view of the position—see into the matter at once, and if possible, regain their freedom with resignation. Should you think this, or indeed whatever you think, the enclosed notice, cut as you may see from an old *Galvani*, may prove of service to you. Reynan is the man for you to see; he was ballet-manager of the Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin at the time when Nita first appeared there, and is a very good fellow—that is to say, one of the greatest rogues in Paris, in his way. The police will tell you his whereabouts.

‘Your affectionate uncle,           H. B.’

“And this was the enclosure—‘We have, among other novelties at the minor theatres, to notice especially the appearance of La petite Nita, about whom all Paris—Paris of the Quartier Latin, at least, is wild. Mademoiselle Nita Dupont (or rather Miss F——; we assume her English extraction to be no secret) has still everything to learn as an artiste; but her youth and peculiar beauty would have made the sternest critics lenient last Saturday night. The storm of applause, the wild showers of bouquets that descended around Mademoiselle Nita at the close of the ballet, could scarcely have been more rapturously accorded had the possessor of that golden head and childish face been the possessor also of the most finished art in Europe.’

“And that cursed parenthesis,” proceeded Bryanstone, slight as was the clue it afforded, was sufficient to rekindle my first and darkest suspicions. F. might point to a hundred other names besides Forrester, of course; but, taken in conjunction with my uncle’s positive certainty as to the identity, the coincidence was more than startling. As to the testimony of the Misses Jarvis, was it not possible that I had after all been made a dupe of by them and their servant? What did I know of these women? I began to ask myself, in fierce self-condemnation for my too easy credence of their words. If deception had been practised, little doubt as to their having been in the conspiracy! Was their manner wholly unguarded and natural? Had not the old servant let slip the words ‘why, there’s Mamselle *again*?’—had there not been ample time for Honoria to warn them by telegraph of my coming, if, as was more than probable, she had remarked any coldness in my manner at parting, and had suspected me of searching into her affairs?

"I would give no time for further preparation, for further warning, now. Whatever it might be possible to gather in Paris respecting the dancer, Miss F——, or 'Nita,' I would learn at once. I ate my dinner with what appetite I could, Nelly; wrote a few lines to Sir Hyde, thanking him for his letter and its enclosure; started by the night train for Folkestone; and at noon on the following day had found out the man I wanted—M. Reynan, in Paris.

"With the first words he spoke to me, I saw that I was on the right track at last."

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## THE TWO LOCKS OF HAIR.

"M. REYNAN had evidently not risen in his profession since the days when 'Nita' danced," proceeded Bryanstone, "for he was still a ballet-director—and a ballet-director now at one of the poorest, shabbiest little theatres in Paris. I had had some difficulty in ascertaining that he was in existence at all; I had more still in getting an audience of him, for the corps de ballet was in the middle of rehearsal, when I penetrated into the unclean back premises of his theatre. The sight of a twenty-franc piece, however, induced a wandering sylphide to show me into what she termed the *foyer de la danse*, with the promise that she would insure the master waiting upon me the moment the dancing-lesson was over; and at the end of half-an-hour or so, M. Reynan entered, and without preamble or introduction of any kind, I asked him what I had come to learn. Did he recollect the girl called 'Nita,' who danced at such a theatre in fifty—? and could he give me any account of what had become of her since? M. Reynan looked at me narrowly. I may remark that he was a little, very old, very dirty Frenchman, possessed of a great deal of manner, and frightful volubility; rested his forehead a minute in his hand, and then launched into a long history which told me nothing whatsoever, save what I already knew.

"'Monsieur Reynan,' I remarked, when he had done, 'I have come here to ascertain one or two plain facts, and to pay handsomely for them. Can you, or can you not, tell me anything about the girl 'Nita,' who danced in your corps de ballet in the year of which I speak?'

"At the word 'pay,' the whole expression of the man's face changed; he came close to my side, and laid one fabulously dirty finger upon my sleeve. (Mind, Nelly, I'm telling you

a story to amuse *you*, and so I don't mind descending a little from high tragedy.) 'Monsieur,' he remarked, in a meaning whisper, "I know *all* about the girl Nita, and what became of her, and everything. But I'm a poor man, a poor man, Monsieur; and in a profession like mine, secrecy is everything, and——"

"In short, he bargained for his price. I promised him what he asked; not very much, really, poor little wretch; but exorbitant according to his ideas; and then he told me all he knew, which amounted to this:—

"A girl, known as Mademoiselle Nita, but who was by birth an Englishwoman, was engaged in 185— by the theatre of which, at that date, he was the ballet-director. She was nothing of a dancer; but drew very good houses during one season by her extreme beauty. In the following winter she was tried at the Italian Opera, where she danced two nights; then was hissed from the stage; left Paris; married, he had been afterwards told; and died. I give you the bare facts, Nelly, ungarnished by the extraneous matter relative to Mademoiselle Nita which Monsieur Reynan freely introduced. 'If Monsieur wishes to see her portrait, it hangs in our little gallery of artistic celebrities,' he remarked, when the story was told. 'Would Monsieur give himself the trouble to turn his head and look at it?'

"I did so, and there—in a company I can't talk to you about, Nelly—hung a coloured photograph of—of the dancer Nita. She was dancing a Spanish shawl-dance with her bare arms clasped above her little golden head, with a dress reduced to the extremest limits that even the ballet allows, with—no, Nelly, no, no, no!" he broke off, passionately, "I can't talk about that. The picture was of Honoria! younger, slighter, fairer, but Honoria! I took her photograph from my pocket and compared the faces, line for line—and hers is no common face, as you know. If I had thought the Jarvises' testimony convincing, what was this?"

"'Monsieur appears to be greatly interested,' said the old Frenchman, watching me closely. 'If Monsieur really desired more detailed information as to the young person's history, it would not be difficult to give it him. One of the old friends and companions of Nita performed at present in his corps de ballet, and was at this moment in her dressing-room, not a dozen yards away. Would Monsieur see this person?' Made-



moiselle Fifine, or some such name. We'll call her Fifine, at all events.

"I answered quietly, 'Yes, I would see her;' took my purse from my pocket and paid him, and then Monsieur Reynan went out of the room, and I was left alone—left to the contemplation of the works of French art that surrounded me (Nita conspicuous above them all), and to such ideas as their sufficiently varied styles of beauty might suggest.

"In about a quarter of an hour Monsieur Reynan returned with Mademoiselle Fifine—a miserable-looking woman, dressed in a faded silk, rouged even at this hour of the morning, and with a stronger odour of absinthe than was agreeable pervading her whole presence.

"Either she was less rapacious than Monsieur Reynan, or she thought an ingenuous air the likeliest one to pay. She began without bargaining, at all events, to answer my questions.

"'Nita—the poor Nita? Mon Dieu, if I know her! But she was one of my most intimate friends. Do you know, Monsieur, that the Nita and I came out in the same year? We made our début at the Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin, both. Ah, yes; eight—nine years, it must be,' turning to Monsieur Reynan, 'since Nita was first engaged by you. Is it not?'

"'It was in 185—,' Monsieur Reynan replied, after a moment's consideration. 'Nine years ago exactly.'

"'And under what name was she entered upon your lists?' I inquired.

"'Mais c'est évident! Under the name of Nita Dupont,' answered the old man, promptly. 'By what name but her own should she have been entered?'

"'Her own name was not Dupont,' I remarked. 'Dupont is not an English name at all.'

"'Monsieur Reynan and Mademoiselle Fifine gave a simultaneous shrug of the shoulders.

"'If Monsieur searched the lists of every theatre at which the Nita danced he would find no name but Dupont,' they answered, both in a breath.

"'But she was an Englishwoman,' I remarked, looking straight into Mademoiselle Fifine's eyes. 'As one of her intimate friends, Madame, you were doubtless aware of that fact.'

"'Monsieur,' answered the dancer, 'I was told by others

that Nita was an Englishwoman. From herself I never heard it; and as far as accent went, she might have passed for a Parisienne.'

"And you never heard of her under any other name than that of Dupont?"

"Never, until after her marriage.'

"And then?"

"Her name, of course was her husband's—Bernadin.'

"I reflected for a minute, and decided that it was useless to press for information that these people either could not or would not give. Besides, if Nita Dupont was dead, what mattered her name; what mattered her country; what mattered any detail of her history to me?"

"You will excuse me for my pertinacity, Madame,' I remarked; 'but it is no idle curiosity that prompts me to ask these questions. Were you acquainted with Nita Dupont after her marriage, and also at the time of her death? This is the last inquiry with which I shall have to trouble you.'

"Mademoiselle Fifine looked over her shoulder suspiciously; then walked to the door and made sure of its fastening before she replied. 'Monsieur,' she observed in a whisper, which, as Monsieur Reynan had now left the room, was certainly unnecessary, 'I know nothing of the Nita after her marriage, beyond occasionally passing her with a bow or a 'bon jour' in the street. But I saw her close—close, Monsieur, after her death. Yes, I saw her then! And Mademoiselle Fifine cast her little black eyes up to the dingy ceiling of the salle with a look of melodramatic meaning, that at once told me she wished to be asked more questions.

"I put them, and at the end of an hour I got out the whole of her story. I can tell it you, Nelly, in two minutes. Upon Nita's return, married, to Paris, Fifine and other of her female friends, naturally showed a disposition to renew their intimacy with their old companion. But Nita's husband would have none of them in his house. His wife was sick; his wife had done with theatres and theatrical people; his wife had domestic duties to attend to. They all knew what this meant, of course. Nita had fallen into the hands of a horrid, suspicious monster, who was jealous of her past life and all belonging to it. When, occasionally, any of them passed the poor child, walking with him,

plainly dressed, and pale and thin, *à faire peur* ! a little short bow, a nervous word or two, was all she evidently dared to give them.

"And even this soon came to an end. One morning, within a year after the marriage, as Mademoiselle Fifine was returning home from rehearsal, one of her friends told her that Nita was dead—had died that morning.

"‘I went to their house at once,’ she concluded, not without an appearance of genuine feeling, ‘and, after hearing from the porter that Monsieur Bernadin was out, walked straight up to the quatrième where my poor friend’s apartment was. An old woman who answered the bell told me that Monsieur was out, and that it was impossible for me to come in till his return. But having got thus far I was not to be turned away so easily, and just brushing the old woman away—so, I walked straight into the sitting-room, then on through another smaller apartment to a bedroom—the room of death!’ And Mademoiselle dissolved.

"‘Nothing had been done for the poor dear corpse,’ she resumed, when she saw that I was prepared to wait patiently while she wept. ‘No holy water at the head of the bed, no flowers on her breast, not so much as I have seen done for some poor nameless wretch dying in an hospital. The blind was left up, and the sun came in. Yes, Monsieur, the sun actually shone, indecently, on the livid face of the dead—the face that half the men in Paris had once been fit to fall down and worship! Well, I went to her side; stooped over and looked at her. She was changed, of course; for she died, as they said, of your national disease, and her features and hands had become frightfully emaciated since I saw them last. But it wasn’t this that shocked me: I was prepared for this. Monsieur,’ and again the woman looked over her shoulder nervously, ‘I saw a thing about Nita’s corpse that I have never seen—(and I have seen hundreds of them) on any corpse before. *The colour of her hair had utterly changed.* It used to be a bright glittering yellow; such a colour as you wot see twice in your life, except on a young child’s head; and now—it was a dull, heavy red!’

"‘Impossible,’ I said quickly; but I heard that my voice had sound unlike its own, for a ghastly coincidence, in that moment of time, had already crossed my thoughts. ‘You were excited at the sight of your dead friend,’ I

added. 'You made no allowance for long illness taking away the lustre of health from the young woman's hair.'

" 'Monsieur,' she answered, 'I was no more excited then than I am now. As to illness taking the brightness from the hair, I know certainly that it would do so, but it would never change its colour totally. Nita's hair in life was yellow—I've a lock of it now; I could show it to you. After her death it was a dull, dark red. I'm not superstitious, Monsieur, quite the other thing. But to my last hour I'll swear no natural illness ever worked such a change as that.'

" 'And you think, then—?' I began to suggest, carelessly.

" 'I think that Nita Dupont was poisoned,' she interrupted, coming close to me and almost whispering the words; 'and I think the effects of the poison worked the change in her that I tell you of. *A Dieu ne plaise* that I should be learned in such things!' she added. 'But the moment I saw her the thought of foul play struck me; and what should I do, Monsieur, but I took out my work-case from my pocket, got out my scissors, and before the old nurse could stop me, cut off a long tress from her head! Almost before I'd finished I heard Bernadin's step, and flew, too thankful to escape with only his curses, as he passed, for my impudence in entering his apartment—for of course, Monsieur, if he had murdered his wife he might have murdered me as easily! And from that day to this I never saw him again. He was arrested not a fortnight afterwards, for reasons of state, I believe, and since then I have heard, I think, that he died in prison.

" 'But, Monsieur, though I could do nothing at the time, nor since—what would the evidence of one poor girl like me have been worth? and what good, now she was dead, would it have been to Nita to prove she'd been murdered?—I've never gone from my first thought. I put the question once, without names, to a friend of mine, a very scientific man indeed, and he laughed at the idea of poison, and said much more likely my friend had dyed her hair. So I gave him a little piece to examine, and he poured acids, and gases, and things on it, and it was not dyed: dyed! what should a woman with such hair as Nita's dye it for? And that confirmed me in my belief. Monsieur,' she added 'I see that you think as I do. Monsieur has turned as white as death.'

" 'I need scarcely tell you, Nelly, that I did not for a second share in the woman's ridiculous suspicions of poison,

or that, supposing I had done so, I should have been wholly indifferent to the domestic differences of Monsieur and Madame Bernadin. What contracted my heart—what, for aught I know, did make my cheek pale, was this story of the hair changing its colour, upon which I seemed to be coming everywhere. Honoria, a dozen times since her marriage, had told me of the singular change her hair had undergone of late years; the Jarvises and their servant had spoken of it while they knew her as red; my uncle was ready to swear to her as the celebrated Nita of years ago from the yellow colour of her hair alone; and now this friend and companion of Nita Dupont informed me that her friend's hair after death was no longer gold, but red—dull, deep red, just as the Jarvises' servant had described Miss Honoria Forrester's! Was I beginning, darkly, to discern the clue I sought, and yet dreaded to find?

"I thanked Mademoiselle Fifine for her confidences; gave her a sum which perfectly satisfied her conscience as to having yielded them; and after considerable argument, and many assurances that I was not going to bring her evidence forward in any way, bribed her into promising me the two locks of hair whose difference of colour formed the strong point of her story. She sent them faithfully to my hotel that afternoon; and I was able to compare them. You may do so now, Nelly. Here they are in my hand. Before going out to meet Lumley I put them up, with Sir Hyde Bryanstone's letter and one or two other papers, into a packet that would have come into Honoria's hands if I had been killed. Living, it is my place, inch by inch, line by line, to find out the truth and act upon it. I owe it simply to myself and to my people to do so; and mercy in the way of concealment I will show her none, if she prove guilty. But when I was just face to face with the possibility of death, Nelly, it seemed different. I have, thank God! no child to call Honoria 'mother,' and if I had died she would simply have passed away quietly, out of the family, and our share in her story would have ended. And thinking this, I just put up such traces of her secret as I possessed into a packet, accompanied by two or three lines, concerning whose purport"—and here Bryanstone's lips did for a moment tremble—"I need not say anything now. I was not killed; and the packet has not left my dressing-case till now. Here it is, and here are the two locks of chameleon hair. Tell me if you

think, with Mademoiselle Fifine, that either poison or witchcraft could have effected the change?"

And as he spoke, Bryanstone produced a small folded packet from an envelope, and placed it in Nelly's hand.

She opened it without a word, and examined the two tresses of hair that it contained long and narrowly. "Mr. Bryanstone," she cried when her survey was ended, "I wish to take no part in all this. In my heart I try not to admit a suspicion even of Honoria. But one thing I would swear; these two locks of hair were never cut from the same woman's head! The red piece is coarse and harsh, the yellow fine and supple as silk; so much I know."

"You are right, Nelly. I felt the same the moment I received them from Mademoiselle Fifine. These two pieces of hair were never cut from the same woman's head. All evidence connected with the red hair I set aside at once, as not concerning myself in any way. It belonged to a certain Madame Bernadin, dead and in her grave. Had the golden tress been cut from the head of the woman I call my wife, or had it not? Even with no counter-interest at work, evidence that shall *prove* any human being's identity is about the hardest that a man can set himself to obtain. On calmly reviewing such broken links as had already come into my possession, it became clear to me at once that the person whose testimony would be worth a thousand-fold more to me than any other must be Bernadin. The man who married Nita the dancer, must have it in his power, if he chose, to throw light upon whatever mystery was connected with this part at least of Sir Hyde Bryanstone's suspicions. I found out more than one person who spoke vaguely of his death, but none of them could give me any certain information as to the place or time of its occurrence. By communicating with the police, however, I should be able to ascertain whether he lived or not; and had it not been for the misfortune of getting wounded in this accursed duel, I should in another week have been back in Paris, and have probably brought the whole inquiry to an end."

"And how were you led into that horrible wicked act at all, sir?—for indeed I must call it by its right name, even though you did it and think it honour. Suspecting, disbelieving Honoria as you did, what made you risk your own life and another's for her sake?"

"Nelly, it was not for her sake at all. A blackguard—the man whose cowardly shot has brought me to this pass—had spoken lightly of my wife, and it was my plain part, whatever her demerit, to tell him that he lied. I did so, on the morning I came to town before seeing the Miss Jarvises; but making some other cause the pretext for my insult to him. You know the rest. Nelly, child," he added, "these are not subjects for you at all. Go back to Norfolk, and don't trouble yourself too much about me. My present life won't last very long. One way or another it must be decided. Why, 'tis too monstrous, too monstrous!" he exclaimed, the blood rising in his pale face, "to think that such a history *can* remain hid, when the man most interested in it would move heaven and earth—would give his own soul to lay it bare! The first step I shall take, as soon as I can act at all, will be to search for Bernadin. If Bernadin lives——"

He stopped abruptly, for a hand was softly turning the handle of the door. In another moment Honoria, with her usual silent tread, entered the room. The afternoon had faded, unnoticed, into evening, while Bryanstone had told his story; but, dim though the light was, Nelly Bertram noticed a ghastly fixedness about Honoria's lips as she came forward, with a little set speech full of delight and wonder, and thankfulness that dear Henry should already have strength enough to sit up so long!

His last words had been of Bernadin; had Mrs. Bryanstone heard them?

## CHAPTER XXIX.

## TELL HIM THE TRUTH.

HONORIA was in despair when Nelly next morning announced her intention of going home. Henry would have a relapse—Henry would be so dull. No one read aloud, no one did anything, like Nelly. Why, even that monster, Martin, had left off suspecting people of poisoning each other since Nelly came: with more of the same nature.

I don't think her eloquence would have effected much; indeed, Bryanstone grew more and more obstinate about Nelly's departure the more Honoria pressed her to stay; had not a *deus ex machina*, in the shape of a letter from Uncle Frank, given opportune weight to Mrs. Bryanstone's wishes. Mr. Bertram had exchanged duties with a brother clergyman at the seaside for six weeks, this letter announced; and Nelly could either accept her friends' solicitations to remain at Brussels, or go and stay with her Aunt Lydia at Ramsgate. He, Uncle Frank, would be back at the parsonage on such a date in March, and would expect her to be home on that evening to make his tea for him.

Now Nelly was not at all a heroine or an angel, but a faulty, impressionable, oftentimes most unreasonable young woman, formed of the commonest flesh and blood; and every word that she had said about wanting to go to her duties was false; and the delight she felt on hearing she might stay longer with Bryanstone was real. "If Honoria wished me gone, or was jealous of me in any way, it would be different," she thought, when she had been having a tough battle with her conscience about going to her Aunt Lydia, and had gained a decided victory over that somewhat resilient faculty; "or if Mr. Bryanstone looked on me in any other light than what he does—a plain, patient sort of woman, who has nursed him diligently in his sickness—or if the state of things between



them was not so miserable, and I did not think I could at least ward the evil day off by remaining——”

And then she went away with rather a hypocritical air of doubt to Mr. Bryanstone, and informed him of her uncle's letter, and of Honoria's arguments, and her own vacillation; “and of course I shall just do as you wish, and as you think best for me to do, Mr. Bryanstone.”

And looking at her flushed, downcast face, Bryanstone, you may be quite sure, went speedily round from all his former views, and thought the best thing for Miss Bertram to do would be to stay in Brussels.

Mrs. Bryanstone's face betrayed more gratification than Nelly had ever yet seen her show, on the morning of Uncle Frank's letter. It was no matter of common interest to her whether her visitor went or stayed. What the future might hold in store she did not, perhaps she dared not, ask herself; indeed, she had long ago felt that in a life of sharp transitions, of fierce hourly gambling like hers, the future is an unprofitable problem to dwell too much upon. The present was her own, to make use of, to work in; and every day that Bryanstone remained quiescent was, at the present juncture, an enormous gain to her. She had had a letter quite recently from Stretton, telling her that he was about to enlist in the Federal army; a lucky bullet any hour might rid her of him: and somehow Stretton, with all his cowardice, was in her inmost heart the enemy she dreaded most. If he was dead, and the Count—but she loathed having to think that thought out—the Count silenced, there was then only one tongue left that could with certainty bear evidence against her. Only Bernadin: the man she had years ago betrayed, and whom she fervently hoped might now prove to be dead.

She strove to believe that it was impossible she *could* have heard the word “Bernadin” that night on Bryanstone's lips; but reason as she would, the bare suspicion tortured her horribly; and, as I have said, every day in which she could still keep Bryanstone under her eyes seemed a priceless gain to her. Within two hours after she had interrupted his conversation with Nelly, she had made the Count de St. Georges start for Paris. It was possible she might have been mistaken altogether. It was possible, barely possible, that Bryanstone was speaking of some other man named Bernadin. But the faintest chance of his being upon the right scent was too all-important

to neglect, whatever it cost. St. Georges had been despatched alone to Paris to ascertain, through every channel he had at command, if Bryanstone had been making inquiries before him; also to see Bernadin, if he lived, and find out his present state of temper and finances. And Honoria, calm outwardly, but with a very fever of excitement burning at her heart, had during this time to go through the daily round of domestic acting with Nelly and her husband.

However he meant to pursue his search hereafter, Bryanstone was quiescent now. Honoria's instinct was right in desiring to keep Nelly near him in these first irritable days of convalescence. For Miss Bertram merely to be in the room soothed him: her conversation, her silence suited him alike. She never bored him—she never allowed him to bore himself; and with life hanging still by so feeble and uncertain a thread, there was perhaps nothing very cowardly in his shrinking a little longer from his repulsive task, and abandoning himself without reserve to the tenderest friendship a man, sick or well, can know—a friendship for a woman with whom he is not, and believes he never will be, in love.

Not in love? Certainly not in love. Once or twice of late Bryanstone had asked himself what his feelings were towards this patient nurse of his, and this was always the answer: he was not, he never had been, in love with her: and yet how far more of a companion she was than any woman he had loved! How entirely, if he had married her, she would have suited him!

It is not a very new story. The eternal sadness of all our lives is in that thought, "Some one lives who would have suited us." We live, we middle-aged men and women of the world, and rear up children, and make money; eat, sleep, and increase in weight; and are alone! The human creature who would have suited us to every fibre of our being we have not found, or, having found, have not possessed; or, worse still, have had a chance of possessing, but undervalued, and so allowed to pass away out of our lives! This last was Bryanstone's case. Nelly's nature fitted into his nature utterly. In whatever mood he was, her presence was welcome to him. He could not have said, "This woman is like or unlike me;" he knew only that she was what he wanted—mind, heart, and soul; and that he might have possessed her, and had not willed to do so! Also, that all sense of Nelly's suiting him,

all the love of her pleading eyes and touching voice and tender hand, would not at all undo the knot that tied him now to Honoria Forrester.

As his strength increased, and Bryanstone was able daily to do more, the two women were naturally more and more thrown upon each other's society. And although Nelly Bertram detested Honoria's character as thoroughly as she had done from the first, she was forced to confess to herself that, as a companion, Bryanstone's wife was far from repulsive to her. All frivolity (the quality most inherently distasteful to Miss Bertram) was on the surface with Mrs. Bryanstone. *And fond* the character was strong and grave to an extent of which the world, and even Bryanstone himself, was wholly ignorant. Something of the greatness which accompanies all fixed ambition kept her above the petty vices of better women. In her way she was magnanimous. If you stood in her path, she would have you removed from it, without pity, without hesitation as to means; but she did not in the meantime worry you with pin-pricks. Many women might have wished to turn to account a female friend's influence over a husband, as she did; but not one in a thousand would have been able to treat her rival with perfect, generous delicacy all the time. She was really too bad—I mean, she lived in a moral atmosphere too essentially remote from the common one—for any such concessions to human frailty. Imagine any really well-principled British matron similarly placed, and say if she would not have felt it her duty to let "the other person" know her opinion of young women who suffered from unrequited attachment, who allowed their thoughts to hanker after married men, and so forth. Honoria simply looked upon Nelly and upon Bryanstone as instruments to be worked as she best might for the attainment of her own ends; and could no more have felt small jealousies or tempers concerning them than I could feel jealousies and tempers against the pen with which I am writing.

One afternoon late Mrs. Bryanstone entered the saloon, and saw Nelly Bertram seated alone by the open window watching the street with wide-open, eager eyes, and with neither work nor book in her hand. Honoria knew quite well what the girl was doing. She was waiting, watching there for Bryanstone's return; and suddenly something of the pathos of this hopeless, patient love smote upon Honoria's

heart, and she stood silent, and with a sort of mixed curiosity and pity looked long at Nelly's face, and tried to speculate upon the nature of her thoughts.

In her life, you must recollect, Honoria had never known the faintest approximation to the sentiment of love. The capacity for it had been crushed as utterly in her as it is in the majority of young women of the world whose profession is marriage; and not very differently crushed either. From the time she was a little girl of fourteen, the grand maxims instilled into her by her compeers had been that men were natural enemies, to be flattered, won, cast over pitilessly for richer rivals. A caprice, a sentiment, had been pointed out to her in the same light as a poor love-match is pointed out by Belgravian veterans to young women in drawing-rooms. Men were possessors of money; from which money it was right and honourable to dispossess them. She knew no other code. Neither in her tarnished youth, nor, I regret to say, in these later years that she had spent among honest people, had one sample of disinterested hearty human love come under her eyes; and what she had seen of it in operas and novels never touched her, never appealed to her in the least—for the woman's nature was singularly realistic and devoid of imagination.

But if a Bushman from Central Africa could come suddenly into a crowded cathedral at the moment when the Host was being blest, the crowd hushed and prostrate, the organ wailing out the first soft notes of the "Agnus Dei," you may be certain some dim sense, some instinct of the meaning of that scene, would wake in him: just as a glimmering of the nature of love crossed Mrs. Bryanstone's barren soul as she looked at Nelly Bertram now. All humanity, however sunk into barbarism, has an instinct towards its God. All women, however denaturalized by civilization, have an instinct towards love. Was there pleasure in this kind of worship, she wondered? Was this poor little plain woman sensible of some occult satisfaction in sitting patiently watching for the first sight of a man who never had been, and never would be, of the slightest tangible advantage to her? What could the pleasure of love be? What *could* be pleasure, in which no gratified vanity, no money, no scope for personal ambition of any kind had place? She could understand the sort of excitement men got out of field-sports. There was a prey to

be run down; a definite object, although only the death of a hare or a fox, to be encompassed. She could understand a passion for art—art led to fame; or for politics, or war. But this—great heavens! this fidelity without profit! this patient, hopeless self-forgetfulness!—what was its meaning?

I repeat, such dim intuitions of love as a savage looking on at High Mass might gain of religious worship, overcame Honoria's mind; but there she stopped. All the rapture, all the consolations of that poor worshipper at whom she was looking, were a sealed book to her. It was love; it was something vaguely above her own comprehension; it was disconnected wholly with silk dresses, equipages, and trinkets. So much Mrs. Bryanstone knew, and no more.

Perhaps if she could have really read Nelly's thoughts at this moment, she would not have found them very transcendental. Human creatures in real life are so much the reverse of grandiloquent in their own inmost hearts! "Five o'clock, and he has not returned yet!" they ran; only that words never faithfully transcribe thoughts: "and he said for certain he would be in at four. Perhaps he has met the English girl he admired so much yesterday, and has been introduced, and is walking with her in the park and looking in her face now. Beauty I saw none. Little baby-faced woman, with foolish blue eyes; but that's what he likes, what all men like. And what does it matter to me what Mr. Bryanstone likes? Not a bit, not a bit. Thank heaven, I am free from all the old folly now! He told me I was thinner to-day, and I am. I take six and a quarter, instead of six and a half, now. What should make me fat? Do I eat? do I sleep? do I go out? And does it matter any of it? If I was as plump as Honoria, I should never be pretty—never—never! and if I'd only been pretty, I should have been loved—all pretty women are. Why, Mr. Bryanstone will come round from his suspicions and love Honoria again some day! If I had her yellow hair and white throat, he wouldn't call me little girl, and child, and Nelly to my face. It's my plainness makes him feel such friendship for me as a man might for a man, and I—I—I—am fool enough to feel my heart turn sick when he only looks at me! I, Nelly Bertram, who call myself proud and good and honest, pining for the sake of a married man who looks upon me like his sister!"

And at this juncture the tears rose up in Miss Bertram's

eyes, and she clasped her hands with a gesture of such genuine simple pain, that Mrs. Bryanstone thought it well to turn the handle of the door loudly as a token of her presence.

"Sitting alone, Nelly? I thought you were with Henry. Haven't you been out to-day?" And then with her habitual tact, Honoria never looked at the girl's tear-stained face, but gave her time to collect herself by running on into a dissertation upon the fineness of the weather, the dryness of the streets, and the lovely blue crape bonnet she had that morning bought at Madame Annette's.

"Not that you care for bonnets," she finished, as she took a chair in the window opposite Miss Bertram. "I wonder sometimes what you do care for, Nelly? Not earthly vanities, certainly."

The remark jarred on Nelly Bertram horribly; much more than any speech of Honoria's was wont to jar on her. "I care for vanities as much as you," she said, bluntly. "I should like dress as much as you do, if I was pretty and had money. Because I'm plain is no reason that I should be without the common feelings and vanities that make up other women's lives. I have got them all. I wouldn't like a blue crape bonnet, because, with my skin, I should look hideous in it. I'd like a white one, relieved with a little good black lace, and with one crimson rose for trimming. Plain as I am, I could dress in perfect taste if I had money to spend on it, and—any one to please by dressing well!" she added, with a stifled sigh.

"Nelly," cried Mrs. Bryanstone, with the kindly show of interest that her French bringing up had made so natural to her, "there cannot be a greater mistake than to speak of being pretty as a thing by itself. Every woman with taste in dress, with the desire to please, above all, with animation, is pretty; that is to say, has all the solid and material advantages of beauty. Look at Frenchwomen. I declare that when you analyse their features and wash off their cosmetics, not one Frenchwoman in a hundred is decent-looking; but they succeed in pleasing infinitely better than Englishwomen with all their beauty do; and why? They wish to please, and dress well, and make up well, certainly. But they do a great deal more. They make themselves the companions of men. You are a Frenchwoman there, Nelly. No English girl I ever knew

could have amused a sick and dissatisfied man like Henry as you have done."

It was the quintessence of subtle flattery; but the action was so delicately perfect, that to Nelly it sounded like magnanimity of the very first water; and in a moment all her own generous heart was ready to cry out in response.

"I've been quiet and patient with Mr. Bryanstone, nothing more, Honoria. Perhaps I've rather a turn for nursing sick people; I don't know. If you, with all your liveliness, had chosen to try to amuse him, and—and—yes, Mrs. Bryanstone, for once I'll speak out—if you were more open with him, and tried to bring about a better state of things, you know quite well you could be a fitter companion to Mr. Bryanstone than I am."

The words almost choked her; it occasioned her such infinite, such complex pain to give them utterance. As for Mrs. Bryanstone, she held her handkerchief to her eyes and meditated. "The little fool believes me jealous, and wants to reassure me," she thought. "Now, if ever, will be the time to find out if he did mention Bernadin. Nelly!" she exclaimed aloud, "what you say is meant for kindness, and does you infinite credit, but—I—I—no, Nelly! I know that Henry would make confidences to you, child as you are, that he would not make to me. I am not jealous. Heaven knows, whatever my faults are, that sort of small meanness is not one of them—but the other evening when I came in, I found him talking with you—you remember, the first day he was able to sit up? a pang did cross my heart as I thought I should never be able to interest him as you can. Nelly, I'm not really frivolous. I don't care at my heart, for balls and parties. I'd give them all up to-morrow if he wished. I'm not really frivolous. I'm not without certain ability, and power of conversation. Numbers of other men have found me a good companion, but Henry never will. Never, while I live!"

Not a syllable, not a look was over-acted, and the tone in which Mrs. Bryanstone spoke was really not without a quiet, half-reproachful, natural emotion. Nelly felt horribly guilty. The blood rushed into her face; her hands got like ice. She felt in I know not what position of blackest treachery, both to husband and wife. She who, up to that moment, would willingly have sacrificed herself in any way but to bring them together, and make Bryanstone's home at peace.

"For curiosity, tell me, now, what you talked about that day?" Honoria pursued, after casting one stealthy glance at her confused face. "I don't mean all, of course. Heaven forbid I should task your memory so far; but the latter part I've a real wish to know,—the part about some man—called Bernadin? I heard as much as that, and I should like to know the kind of subject that would interest poor Henry now."

Then Nelly looked abruptly, and caught Mrs. Bryanstone's eyes. Their latent expression of intense, acute suspicion struck her in an instant. She remembered how the noiseless footsteps had entered Bryanstone's room; how rigid and strange Honoria's lips had looked when she came up to them, and—reader, what sensation do you suppose overcame Miss Bertram with regard to her rival at this moment?—profoundest pity. The only time Nelly was ever in London in her life, her Aunt Lydia took her to the opera to see "Lucretia Borgia," and at the point when her denouncers gather round the hapless heroine, every fresh voice swelling the chorus that proclaims her infamy, Nelly, then fifteen, had, in spite of all Aunt Lydia's didactic moralisings, burst into tears, and declared her sympathies to be with the guilty one.

Something of the same emotion, of the same desire to stand by the losing side, touched her now. Mrs. Bryanstone was alone. However guilty, she was fighting an unequal fight, and one in which Nelly's reason told her she must fall.

"Honoria," she cried, jumping up, and moving nervously from the window, "I don't remember all Mr. Bryanstone said; and if I did I wouldn't think it right to repeat it even to you. But this I do say,—you ought to try to win his confidence, and give him yours. I know enough of his character to feel sure that nothing would ever gain upon him like perfect truth on your side."

Then, actually frightened at her own boldness, and at the whole position in which she stood, the girl broke off abruptly, and rushed away out of the room.

"And St. Georges called me a fool to have her here," thought Mrs. Bryanstone; "sneered when I said the things she called principle, honour, generosity, could be turned to good account. Tell him the truth! Poor little mole, didn't she see that her own advice gave me all the information I wanted? He suspects me, and makes her his confidante."



"Tell him the truth;" after a long pause this, and when she was watching Bryanstone's face as he entered the courtyard beneath the window. "I'm not sure sometimes that I won't; or some truth. The time is coming fast when passive defence will not be enough. Tell him the truth."

The mere novelty of the idea gave it a certain piquancy to Mrs. Bryanstone. Nelly evidently understood Bryanstone's character. A woman as much in love as to be able to await a man's coming patiently for pleasure, was not likely to give advice adverse to what she conceived to be for his good. How could one know that, to a man of his proud nature, confidence might not be the best card that now remained for her to play? —or if not actual confidence, what should look like it? At the next turn fate took against her how would it be to assume the initiative, and speak? If, in spite of all her precautions, Bernadin came to light, or Stretton returned, it would indisputably be better for Bryanstone to hear the history of the past from her lips than from theirs. The past! Well, but the past was dead and gone. Could anything be *proved*? Was not one clue, the most important of all, her own identity, buried in a moss-grown grave at Père la Chaise? The dead, at least, could not rise up against her. Why, with Bernadin himself confronting her, it would be but a matter of hard swearing on both sides to decide whose body lay in those six feet of earth.

Ay, this was the strongest point of defence left to her now. Tell him the truth.

## CHAPTER XXX.

## A SCENE AT THE THEATRE.

ALL the Brussels world was at the Opera that night, Honoria Bryanstone amongst them.

It was the first appearance of a new singer, and in the whole brilliant tier of boxes of that most brilliant little theatre in the world, the eye could scarce detect one vacant place. As she took her seat in one of the stage boxes, and cast a rapid glance over the crowded house, the whole mass of detail of another début (a début in Paris, of ten years or more ago) flashed full upon Honoria's recollections.

Her cool, unemotional temperament rendered such visitations of rare occurrence to her; hence, probably, why she was really so lightly burdened by vain regrets. Human beings who repent and grieve are human beings with keen-wrought nerves, with a brain that never tires of reproducing for them the raw material—the *mise en scène*—of ancient guilt. To Honoria, with her magnificent digestion, her boundless capacity for sleep, a thing done was done; none of the phantasmagoria of weaker stomachs and less healthy brains keeping up that fever of unforgetfulness that we call remorse.

But for once the electric cord was smote even in her. For a minute, this was not the Brussels theatre; she was not Henry Bryanstone's wife. Again, a trembling, half-clad child of seventeen, she stood, alone and dazzled, as the curtain rose for the ballet at the Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin. Again that white sea of human faces, the men and women whose applause or censure was to be her fate, surged before her; again she felt all the sickness of that supreme moment; again saw, as a drowning man reviews in a moment whole years of life, every detail of the scene; the musicians looking at her over

their instruments; the critics, cool and impassive, in the stalls; the silent pit, the brilliant tier of boxes, the indistinct cloud of bloused and bonneted figures, close, as it seemed, beneath the roof; again she felt all the torture of the first scene, when hisses from the other faction (every actor or dancer believes in a faction) so nearly carried the day: again she felt her heart, her brain, her feet, her whole being carried away by rapture as the hisses, minute by minute, became less audible amidst the general applause; again her head swam with wild intoxication of that moment, when recalled for the second, for the third time, and standing amidst a perfect avalanche of flowers, she clasped one childish hand above her heart, and with the other sent kisses to a crowd of eighteen hundred people. For a minute, and only for a minute; then Honoria remembered quite well who she was now, and that the lorgnettes of half the men in the Brussels theatre were turned upon her, and that no woman in that theatre was handsomer or better dressed than herself, Henry Bryanstone's wife.

Since his accident—by this euphemism she called the duel, even to her own thoughts—she had considered it good taste always to be dressed in subdued demi-toilettes when she appeared in public. Now that her husband was abroad again, however, she felt that even the exigencies of English convention need no longer restrain her as to colours; and to-night, for the first time, she appeared in full evening dress. It was a dress that suited her hair and skin to perfection. Violet velvet opening over a stomacher and under-skirt of white satin—she was always slightly theatrical in style—with knots of pearl for trimming, and tiara and necklace to match. Like all women who are artistes in the science of dress, Honoria, as I have once before remarked, thoroughly understood the value of change. Her beauty never tired you, for it was never twice the same. To-night her cheeks were colourless as marble, a faint bistre shade surrounded her eyes, and then in marvellous contrast, her hair, irradiated by heaven knows what mystic process, was more yellow than gold itself; her lips were vivid scarlet, her eyebrows and eyelashes black as night itself. She knew how beautiful men were thinking her, and her heart quickened at the thought. Her life was not a bad life, she decided, even taking it with all its fierce risks of shame and failure. For ten years, ever since she was a little girl of sixteen, she had been admired, and there was not a line, a sign of

falling off, on her face yet. She might be as handsome as ever for another ten years. Ten? why should she even put that limit to her power? Was she not of the fair complexion, of the matchless health, which might make a second Ninon de l'Enclos? Understanding dress, in the largest sense of the term, as she did, why should not that fatal fortieth birthday, which to most women is as a death-knell, come and pass by uncared for?

If only—if only St. Georges were but to arrive and set her latest fear at rest! tell her that Bernadin indeed was dead or had forgotten her, she felt that for this one night at least she should be satisfied! Not in a seventh heaven of intoxicated success, as that little ballet-dancer of ten years ago had been. She was much too heavily weighted to mount so high now. But in a state as nearly approaching contentment as was possible for her: well dressed, jewelled, surrounded by admiration, in a good and honourable position, and with no more startling danger than usual, of having all these things—her gods—wrested from her.

But as the opera progressed, and while Mrs. Bryanstone's box was thronged with other men, no St. Georges appeared. He was to have arrived from Paris by the train that reached Brussels at six, and to have joined her at the theatre. That he was not there early did not surprise her. She understood St. Georges' nature well enough to feel that he would not have waited on an empress before going through an elaborate toilette and dinner after his journey. But when the last act was drawing to a close, and it was borne in upon her for certain that the count was not coming, her heart began to contract strangely. She had received a note from him that morning, in which he had spoken of his return as certain. What could have made him stay? Was treachery possible?—double treachery: he and Bernadin joining issue as they found her husband on the right track, and deciding to bring their information, while it was yet saleable, to Bryanstone himself. Great God! at this moment they might be with him, repeating that history which, detail by detail, word by word, she had so often rehearsed to herself, just as she *felt* it must some day reach his ear.

What madness had made her ever give St. Georges the clue to her relation with Bernadin? In reading trials in newspapers she had often noticed how criminals, by some special act of folly of their own, will make over the very certainty of

their detection into the hands of justice; had noticed and smiled over such weakness. And now had she not done literally the same? If St. Georges was her accomplice, was he not also her most implacable enemy? Would he leave a stone unturned to get her further in his power? If Bernadin lived, would he content himself with simply ascertaining the fact, and never seek to reap benefit to his own pocket through this fresh witness against herself?

Mrs. Bryanstone fevered as she thought of these things: fevered in the midst of all the success and admiration which, a short half-hour before, she had hugged herself as possessing. The shame of nobler natures, self-disdain, was unknown to her; but she was keenly, bitterly alive to the ever-impending risk of being shamed in the eyes of others. It needed no very vivid imagination, no very refined sensitiveness, to enable her to picture and recoil from the horror of that!

How if she should return to-night and find Bryanstone's door closed against her? If to-morrow all this glittering world of men and women should look upon her as an out-cast?

Every living being, probably (however else we differ), has this in common: he desires only what seems to him to be good. The sweetness of man's blood to the tiger; the absence of a hated person to the murderer; the warmth and softness of your velvet chair before the fire to the terrier cold and wet out of the street; the extirpation of heresy to a fanatic; the winning of heaven to the monk in his barren cell; an ideal good, whether patiently yearned after or rudely snatched, is certainly the motive power in all. Dresses, diamonds, a fine house, an old name, made up Honoria's ideal of good. The means by which they were to be got affected her with neither pleasure nor pain, any more than the mute agony of his victim's eyes affects the tiger, or the smutching of your velvet chair the terrier. And sitting there in her satin and pearls, and thinking that some day she might have to dress in shabby silks again, she would just have signed the death-warrants of Stretton, St. Georges, and Bernadin with as little sense of guilt as you and I feel when we brush away the flies that disturb our afternoon *siesta*, or strike down (and so leave to die a dozen lingering deaths) the wasp that settles on our plate of fruit.

Would. And how powerless, in reality, she was; how the

sense of her impotence fretted her ; how inane were the compliments of all these men she was smiling on ; how desperately she longed to get out in the open air and act, drive to St. Georges' lodgings (for so, in his note, he had bade her do in the event of his not appearing at the theatre)—anything rather than remain longer in inaction, in suspense.

Half a dozen men were waiting to escort Mrs. Bryanstone when she prepared to leave her box. She accepted the arm of a very withered, very ugly little Russian prince, but with whom she would rather have been seen than with the handsomest or cleverest untitled man in Europe ; and when, radiant with well-imitated smiles and *empressement*, his highness was being permitted to adjust her cloak over her shoulders, she turned and glanced round the house to be sure that all her English friends were noticing her last success.

I have said that for some caprice or other, her cheeks were left of their natural hue that night. Had they been an inch thick in enamel, I think the pallor which came over her face at this moment must have betrayed itself. The curtains of the stage-box opposite her own, which had been closely drawn all the evening, were withdrawn ; and there, half hidden in shadow, and intently watching her, stood—Anthony Stretton ! No need of a second glance ; no matter that his dress was a disguise ; that he moved away in an instant. Their eyes had met, and she knew him. The little prince made tender remarks about her health as he begged her to wrap her cloak more closely round her, and she smiled in his face as she answered, and all the Anglo-Brussels world prophesied that that would be the next flirtation, and then his highness led her out through the crowd, and she felt the cold night-air on her face, and saw people getting into their carriages, and remembered she must do the same, and go—where ? Home ? No, to St. Georges' lodgings, where Stretton, for aught she could tell, would follow ! And as she stood there, thinking these things, and waiting for her carriage to come up, she clasped the prince's arm so closely, and answered his pretty attempts at love-making in so singular a voice, that his highness felt almost frightened at the rapid progress made by his own charms.

"Home ? yes, home, of course. To the Hôtel des Pays Bas." The little Russian stood for a minute, and watched the carriage, as Mrs. Bryanstone drove away. It was bright

moonlight; and he was able distinctly to track it across the Place de la Monnaie and down the Longue Rue Neuve immediately opposite. Was there an accident, that the carriage slackened its pace so abruptly? No, Mrs. Bryanstone must have checked the driver; for at the same moment she put her head out of the window, evidently to speak to him, and then the carriage stopped, came back a few yards towards the Place de la Monnaie, and turned into one of the smaller streets leading towards the Faubourg du Jardin Botanique.

Another man standing close beside the prince was watching this pantomime too; and as he watched, a suppressed English oath broke from his lips. A minute later, a dark figure glided across the moonlit Place; and then with stealthy rapid pace turned into the narrow side street Mrs. Bryanstone had taken.

The carriage was still in sight. And with an oath louder spoken and coarser than the last, Anthony Stretton swore to follow it to its destination.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

## HOW SOME PEOPLE HAVE TO LIVE.

IN the year eighteen hundred and forty —, more than a dozen years before Henry Bryanstone's marriage, two children, a boy and a girl, first made each other's acquaintance in the coulisses of one of the poorest little theatres in Paris. They looked upon themselves as "artistes," and in a certain sense they were so; the boy, who was a model of beauty, and small of his age, filling the part of acrobatic Cupids in those representations peculiar to French taste termed "féeries;" the girl, a hungry-looking, melancholy child of thirteen, a "rat" in theatrical parlance, receiving twenty sous a night for clasping her arms above her head, and oscillating from one leg to the other, in the choruses of the ballet—such a ballet as it was.

Now, in theatres, as in most other mixed human societies, children of this particular sort of age—old enough to remark everything and set everybody by the ears—are looked upon as a downright plague by all grown-up men and women; and to this rule these two "artistes" I speak of were no exception; the boy especially. With his angelic, infantine face, his soft tongue, his pretty little graceful gestures, this child, Jacques—no one ever knew of his having another name—possessed the most precociously wicked heart conceivable. Men and women, the women most, trembled at the malignant, the diabolical sarcasms that used to flow from those childish lips. No kindness won upon him; no sense of gratitude was in his nature. Having once found what delicious zest there is in being feared, he used his weapons unsparingly. As long as the manager was his friend, he knew that he might brave the subordinates with impunity. And the manager was not likely to turn against him. First, because he got his services and lovely face for nothing; secondly, because the child was a useful spy and eavesdropper among his adult *confrères*. The father of



Jacques, one of the stage-carpenters, had been killed by an accident in the theatre. Of his mother no one ever heard. He had not a relation or friend, save the manager, in the world. His education, ever since he remembered anything, had been received in the dark regions of this fifth-rate theatre, and before this of others where his father worked, and on the Paris streets.

No wonder, some people would say, that at twelve years of age he was—what he was. For myself, I should doubt whether education or absence of education can change the normal structure of any living creature. Vitiating and stunted, no doubt, must have been the moral growth of any child brought up in such an atmosphere as this; still, in ninety-nine children out of a hundred, equally situated, you would, I think, have found, at twelve years of age, some place for human affection; some capacity, at least, for the love that had never fallen to their lot. Jacques was stone to the core of his little worthless character. Beautiful in person, keen in intellect, but with the whole moral nature—all that we think of when we say soul or heart—a blank. He would have been the same if he had been a prince; although a different education might have developed a different description of evil out of him; but a crime will serve for a test as well as a virtue.

There were as good hearts in that poor troupe of actors as in any palace—women among those not-at-all honoured *coryphées* who would have been as tender to a forlorn little child as any titled maid of honour of them all. And Jacques would have none of them. Friendship was not his *métier*. Bred in a palace, he might of course have grown up to be a blackguard on a grand and princely scale; bred in the green-room of a fifth-rate Paris theatre, he grew up, through successive stages, to be a *chevalier d'industrie* and the Count St. Georges!

Of the girl who was his companion—not so much from friendship as from simple necessity, the two children being of the same age, and consequently thrown upon each other for companionship—I need say little here. Like many girls who grow handsome three or four years later, she was actually plain at thirteen; thin, pale, freckled; and with only even little white teeth, and a mass of perfectly golden hair, to give promise for the future. Except when Jacques implicated her in any of his *diableries*, she had not a bad character in the

theatre. A certain hard selfishness withheld her from being liked; but she was punctual and orderly in such small matters as concerned herself; painstaking; and, as a rule, averse to appropriating other people's property—virtues not without weight in any section of society. As far as friends or relations went, she was believed to be no better off than Jacques. Like him, she was an orphan; her mother having died when the girl was ten or twelve years of age, her father two years later. He was an Englishman, and it was said at the theatre, a gentleman by birth; but the girl was taciturn on the subject of her parentage, and the manager, after the custom of managers, mysterious as to the way in which any of his young pupils came into his hands.

Her first intimacy with Jacques lasted more than two years, during which period they quarrelled furiously about three times in every week, and still came together again, and made holiday in common, poor little wretches! on the succeeding Sunday. At the end of that time the manager of the theatre happening to become obnoxious in the eyes of the Parisian police, he thought it well to accept the post of ballet-master at one of the smaller theatres in Vienna, and offered to take Mademoiselle Nita with him as his pupil, which offer the child, young as she was, thought it to her interest to close with. When Jacques saw her next, four years later, she was dancing in the principal *rôle* of the ballet at the Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin: with half Paris at her feet.

And Jacques himself? Well, the handsome little acrobat had not entirely been misappreciated by the world, either. When he was about seventeen years old, the widow of a rich Havanna merchant, a woman double his own age, fell in love with the young actor's handsome face, and, a much more unusual accident, resolved to marry him.

Monsieur Jacques, young as he was, had not a character to resist any overtures that might be made to him in the shape of money. He worshipped his mature and swarthy innamorita as fervently as if she had been a girl of his own age; was established by her in an apartment, Rue de Rivoli; applied himself with wonderful aptitude to fencing, dressing, smoking, drinking, gambling, and all other necessary accomplishments for a young gentleman of fortune, for more than two years; and at the end of that time was once more cast penniless upon

the world, his patroness, who was not without gastronomic as well as amative tastes, dying of a *salmi* the very week before Jacques, now calling himself the Count St. Georges, was to have become her husband.

What was to be his next step in life? he questioned himself, looking round upon the pretty apartment in which his friend had installed him; the furniture of which, with the clothes he wore, two very showy screws, a portrait of Madame, and several dozens of champagne, constituted the whole of his worldly possessions. To return to the hard work and scanty wages of his old profession would have been abhorrent to him, after leading for two years the life of a count, for which he believed nature originally designed him. But what other means of support were open to him? He would, possibly, have been willing to take a situation and work honestly in it. But how find one? A handsome face, natural grace of manner, premature proficiency in *écarté*—as indeed in all other games of chance—and an early training as a rope-dancer, are not qualifications to get a lad on towards honest promotion in Paris more than elsewhere. In short, without will or act of his own, St. Georges was an adventurer at nineteen; and with that natural instinct which, I fear, is a rudimentary idea, or inchoate tendency, in all men who know the honest paths of life to be shut against them, resolved that, as society would make no use of him, he would do his best to make use of society. He knew numbers of men who got credit with no more ostensible means than play and betting, and generally employing the pockets of their friends. Handsome, clever, young, and *lancé*—the first great point for a Parisian adventurer to overcome—could he not still continue to keep his apartment and his showy screws, and wear lovely neckties and kid-gloves, and command the glances of pretty women in the Bois and at the Opera? All the things that in St. Georges' (relative) state of innocence made up his sum of earthly ambition and enjoyment.

He tried the experiment, and for a time succeeded tolerably in keeping his creditors at bay. For a time: then came a day on which, as by horrible accord, his wine-merchant, his tailor, his landlord, all pressed their claims at once. A day on which some of his dearest friends forgot to call; and others who did call could only regret their profound inability to lend him money. And now St. Georges looked

starvation in the face again; and asked himself, as honest *lansquenets* and *écartés* would not support a man, what would?

De Loriot and Marcus were men who *lived* by play; but then De Loriot and Marcus were men whom the young fellows he lived among, and St. Georges himself till now, had looked upon with more than mistrust. Well, no matter; they lived. Marcus was starting just now for Vichy, and had more than once already invited him, St. Georges, to accompany him. Evidently the man recognised superior ability in him to desire to have him as a companion; and, sharper or no sharper, it was certainly better to live at Marcus's expense for a few weeks than to starve, virtuously, in Paris. The baths were excellent places, he knew, for meeting with wealthy women of all nations. With his handsome face, a successor, in some shape, to the Havanna widow was tolerably certain to arise. And he went.

Two months later his creditors consented to arrange with him for a third of their claims; next winter St. Georges had a charming little establishment in Paris; was a recognised authority in everything, from neck-ties to *prima donnas*; had a crest on his plate; family miniatures on his walls; and an ancestor who was killed beside Henri Quatre at the battle of Ivry.

What paid for all this? His friend Marcus had never done so badly as during this particular season; and St. Georges, with the best will in the world, had had no opportunities of launching forth in his new career. But temptation to a deeper dishonour than card-sharpping had fallen across his path. On the day when he and Marcus decided that it was fruitless for them to remain longer at Vichy, a young Mexican, whom St. Georges knew by name, the niece of his first benefactress, appeared with her husband at the baths. He introduced himself in the name of his beloved Maritana; was received kindly, invited to the hotel; wormed himself into the confidence both of husband and wife; and a few weeks later had received a set of diamonds, worth seven or eight thousand francs, and an agonised promise of future payment, from the latter. All the letters of his departed Maritana, letters containing family secrets of all kinds, had fallen into his hands on the day she died, and of this precious repository the diamonds of the young Mexican, paid not to conceal her own but another's guilt, were the first fruits.

A man who has once sunk to an action like this—an action that the moral code of men of all opinions and classes alike brands as vile—never retrogrades by a single step. From the day on which he made his first “coup” in Vichy to the present, St. Georges’ life had been one long list of infamies too trite, too pitiful to dwell upon. Had he succeeded? Do such men ever succeed? Must not ambition, wherein lies the very germ of all success, perforce be dead in a man whose bread depends upon his remaining nameless; whose greatest triumph can last only until he is found out; who, at his brightest time, will say to his friend or Laïs of the moment, “Let me eat and drink—for to-morrow the police?”

St. Georges thought he had got on pretty well altogether. If he had to live over again, he was quite sure he would rather have done as he had done than remain an acrobat. His digestion and appetite were excellent; he had visions still of settling himself in marriage; or perhaps some day keeping a third-rate gambling-house in Paris. Taking the word “success” in its abstract rather than conventional sense, he had possibly gone as near it as a great number of persons whom the world agrees in considering successful. He was unhaunted, at least, by the sense of failure, either present or future; and I fancy very few of our greatest heroes are ever so successful as to be able to say much more than that.

All that *we* call success—the good-will of better men than ourselves; the sense of hard-won victory over evil; the prospect of peaceful honour in old age—St. Georges knew nothing of. How should he? What does his prototype, the little city Arab, rearing his palaces of mud in a corner of his own alley, know of the beautiful possessions, the picture-books, the rocking-horses, the waxen women, that make Belgravian children happy?

However freed from the exigencies of commonplace respectability in most things, there is one law to which gentlemen of the Count St. Georges’ profession are as inexorably enslaved as though they were barristers expecting briefs, or surgeons broken limbs. They must keep up an appearance. St. Georges’ very existence depended on his credit; and to credit the slightest on-coming symptom of economy is fatal. On the same footing as he started his establishment in any place he must hold it to the end. To have put down his brougham, when he had once started a brougham, would have

been as suicidal a step for him as for a struggling dentist to replace his boy in buttons by a maid-of-all-work.

At different times, and under different reverses of fortune, the Count had gone through personal privations which, in another cause, would have been heroic. He had committed petty basenesses without number; had sold his friends; had sold himself. But since the first day on which he found himself an adventurer, launched upon the great Paris world, until now, he had never, even by his worst enemies, been accused of retrenchment. Once or twice he had smashed utterly: that is a thing that not unfrequently happens to young men of family: had smashed, disappeared; and then, after a lapse of time, had arranged with his creditors, and risen, phoenix-like—valet, brougham, stall at the opera, and all—out of the ashes of his own dishonoured bills. But on each occasion he had “kept up” to the last: serene in countenance, perfect in dress, until the hour when he had no longer a meal to eat.

“*La garde meurt, mais ne se rend pas*,” is an axiom not to be appropriated exclusively to the use of honest men.

Brussels was not a city in which the same style of living was necessary, as was necessary in Paris or Vienna. All that St. Georges pretended to at present was a modest but thoroughly comfortable bachelor's life. His own personal appliances, of course; his perfumes, his cambric, coronetted handkerchiefs, his immaculate gloves as in Paris; but for his *ménage*, a small suite of apartments on a first floor in the best boulevard of the town; and his Parisian servant, a greater rogue if possible than himself, and whose wages were exorbitant, but who served him at once as valet, butler, and cook. A first-class Parisian cook was a simple necessity to him. On occasion he could appease his hunger, like a wild animal, on the coarsest fare of the commonest cabaret. He would no more, “with his head above water,” have subjected himself to the greasy abominations of third-rate French restaurants in Brussels, than he would have drunk champagne (like an Englishman) with his meat, or have gone without fresh violets on his dressing-table in spring. When he was down he disappeared,—sank, as only Frenchmen of his type do sink, into fierce and abject misery, into squalor and rags at once. The moment he rose to the surface, all the little graceful luxuries of life became absolute necessities to him again. He could exist, like the chrysalis, underground; he

could live, like a butterfly, in the sun. But his constitution, moral as well as bodily, seemed unfitted for any intermediate or transitional state.

When Honoria entered his apartment, noiselessly and discreetly ushered in by Monsieur Adolphe, whose well-bred face betrayed not the faintest look of surprise at such a visitor, the first thought that struck her was the luxury in which this man lived. Her great objects of life, were, in the main, the same as his; the pleasures which each took, or sought to take, out of daily life, were, perforce, different; and it struck Mrs. Bryanstone vividly at this moment by how much the Count, simply because he was a man, she a woman, had the best of it. The most trivial, like the highest enjoyment she was capable of, was still dependent upon others; the envy of women, the admiration of men. St. Georges was happy in himself; in the mere daily gratification of his own sensuous nature. And in this kind of enjoyment, so long as the means of supplying it last, there is no admixture, as there always must be in every one of a woman's successes, either of disappointment or of failure.

The odour of flowers and of wines reached her as soon as she entered the Count's antechamber, a small, long-shaped room, hung round with admirable copies in Gobelin tapestry of some of Le Sueur's most celebrated designs; for the Count was *un peu artiste*, and exacting in everything about him that pertained to art. The remains of a small and exquisite dessert stood upon a round table in the centre of the luxurious velvet-hung dining-room, through which Monsieur Adolphe next ushered her; but it was in the third room of the apartment, the room that a woman would have called her boudoir, a man, his sanctum, that the Sybarite tastes of St. Georges showed themselves to the full. Had it been fitted up by loving hands for a bride, more minute care could not have been shown in its arrangements. Silken curtains, relieved with festoons of Alençon lace; luxurious divans; on the buhl dressing-table ivory-fitted brushes, perfumes, trinkets innumerable; these were the objects on which the first gains of a man who, six weeks before, was literally starving, had been lavished. Bouquets of violets—he could not exist without flowers—made the air heavy with their sweetness; and as Honoria entered, the flame of a piled wood-fire, joined with the subdued light of wax-candles

(for I need scarcely tell you a man like the Count disdained gas) threw a voluptuous rose-colour over all.

The Count St. Georges was lying outstretched upon a divan beside the hearth, smoking a Turkish-pipe, his eyes half-closed as the wreaths of silver smoke curled up lazily from his lips. He was dressed in a wrapper of brocaded purple silk; and by his side, on a little inlaid table, stood a bottle of some amber-coloured liqueur, and one tiny glass. I have already said that St. Georges was handsome; he was more than handsome; his face had developed into nobler beauty than even the little artiste of a dozen years before had promised. For the strict purposes of poetical justice, handsome villains should be invariably spoilt by a sinister expression about their eyes. No such obliquity, to tell the truth, occurred in St. Georges'. He had handsome iron-blue eyes, deeply set, and with any expression whatsoever that he chose to throw into them; a Grecian nose and mouth, even and snow-white teeth, a splendid tawny-brown beard, and short-cut ebon hair. His brow was broad and full of thought; his head modelled not alone in accordance with the requirements of art, but of phrenology. No undue development of the lower qualities, no depression of veneration and benevolence. For the rest, his figure was strongly knit, and, for a Frenchman, tall—five feet nine or ten; his hands and feet as well shaped, as though all the old blood of the Faubourg St. Germain flowed in his veins.

But neither the sight of his luxury nor of his handsome person appeared to have a very softening effect upon Mrs. Bryanstone. Throwing off her ermined opera-cloak, she walked up to the Count's side, and exclaimed, without an attempt at any commonplace salutation, "Well, what have you done? Is he dead? You seem to have forgotten, I think, that I sent you an errand, and that you have not delivered your answer."

"Forgotten?" and the Count looked up at her without rising; "O no, I have not; I never forget anything."

"You were to come to the theatre to tell me; that's all."

"And after I had dressed and dined, the fire and my pipe over-tempted me to stop at home, and I succumbed, as you see. I knew it wasn't a matter of such life and death that it would not keep till to-morrow; also, that if you really wanted to see me you would, as I advised you, come to my house. And I was right."



He raised his pipe to his lips, took a long, deliberate inhalation of its fragrant contents, then emitted a volume of blue smoke that for a moment almost shut out his handsome, insolent face from Honoria's sight.

"And Bernadin lives, and you have seen him!" she cried, but in the quiet, concentrated tone that with her denoted rising passion, "and have compared notes, and agreed probably at what price you will sell me! You may as well tell me the truth—I mean as near the truth as it's possible for your tongue to come. I know by your insolence that you have betrayed me."

"Madame, if you know so much, and believe me so little," he answered quietly, "what use is there in my speaking?"

She turned away, and took one or two quick impetuous turns up and down the room, while the Count still continued to smoke, with imperturbable good temper, and with half-closed eyes. At last she stopped, just before the dressing-table, and for a minute seemed to examine with interest its childish profusion of magnificent toys.

"Jacques," she exclaimed, abruptly, "you value all this?" and with a disdainful sweep of her hand she took in the whole voluptuous adornment of the little room. "For toys like this, for liqueurs, for Turkish tobacco—above all, to be thought not the child of the people you are, but an aristo, born to such things—for all this, you would sell your soul, if you had one. Well, how do you pay for it? As little as you can, of course. Still, for a great deal you must pay; and, above all, you must have credit. How do you pay? Something out of the money you win at cards, doubtless. But lansquenet is uncertain, and pigeons are not always forthcoming for piquet and écarté. Your second grand resource—I don't know that I shouldn't put it first—is by getting bribes of silence out of women. Don't speak, sir—don't answer till I have done." He had put down his pipe now, and risen to his feet, confronting her. "You know that this is true of you. Among a circle of men like yourself—of the greatest blackguards in the world, that is to say—you pick up a word here, and a hint there, and then put all you have heard together, with the genius of scoundrelism that I allow you to possess, and traffic upon it. Deny it, if you can! What but abject fear made that wretched girl at Vichy first give you the money that launched you upon the Parisian world?"

"I have had precious little money of yours, at all events," he answered, between his teeth. "You had better confine yourself to your own affairs, madame."

"Money? No, you have not had much money, in gold or bank notes; that's not the way that I am to pay you! An introduction in London is to be the price of your silence in my case. First in Paris, then in Vienna, then in half-a-dozen of the other capitals of Europe, the Count St. Georges' handsome face and matchless rascality have met with success. In no London drawing-room, or London club, has he been able to set his foot. He went there once, but found that one or two friends who had noticed him at Baden, and even in Paris, quite forgot him in Regent Street; and after hanging about for a time in the purlieus of Leicester Square——"

"Nita!" he interrupted, a sullen glow rising in his eyes, "this kind of conversation is childish, and in the worst possible taste. Let us quit it, if you please, and return to business."

"Business!" she echoed, bitterly; "as if I would talk to you of anything but business! as if I am wasting all this breath for any other end than to bring your own wretched interest as strongly before you as I can! Poor, unknown, starving, the Count St. Georges was, I repeat, one day in an eating-house in Leicester Square—not eating, for he had no longer a twenty-sous piece that he could call his own, but desperately searching for some stray victim—perchance some old acquaintance to beg a dinner out of—when chance threw him across the very object to serve him best—a woman concerning whose past life he possessed a secret, and who to a certain extent was in his power. You remember the sequel, Count? Heaven, what a dinner I gave you! With what a famished appetite, like a starved hound, you ate it!"

He sprang up, and grasped her wrist fiercely; the last human feeling he had—pride—goaded to the uttermost. "Take care what you do," he said, in a hoarse whisper; "if you say another word of this, I'll go to your husband to-night, I swear it, and betray you!—betray you, mind, as I couldn't have done a week ago, even if I had wished it. Bernadin has told me all!"

## CHAPTER XXXII.

## THE FOOTSTEPS IN THE STREET.

HONORIA's hand fell nerveless from his clasp; the heavy moisture gathered, in a second, round her whitening lips. "And Bernadin is coming here?" she gasped; "is here, in Brussels, now? Tell it me out—speak! I—I'm not afraid of you," rallying, like the lioness she was, before danger; "I can brave you all—Bernadin, St. Georges, Stretton—and defy you! Unless you're afraid, speak! Where is he?"

St. Georges looked at her with the sort of feeling, half-fear, half-admiration, that the very vilest men are sensible of for sheer physical pluck like hers.

"Bernadin is not here, madame," he answered, after a moment's pause; "Bernadin is not coming here, unless summoned by me. That he remembers you with no particular love, you may believe. But he is a sensible man, well in with the government, and not at all anxious to reopen any old scandal respecting his own, or—*his wife's* history. Let us imitate his example, madame: let us be discreet. Can anything be more childish than for old friends to lose their tempers, and use harsh words as we did just now?"

Honorina broke away from him, and took one rapid turn up and down the room, then she came back to his side. "You are right," she said, in a softened voice; "hard words are useless. If I used them, 'twas but to show you more plainly the position you and I stand in; the good and the ill we may still get out of each other. Whatever else I am, I am not mean, Jacques. When I first got into Mrs. Forsyth's service, I tried my best to get rid of you; so much I say openly: had letters written telling you of my death, and hoped fervently never to have seen your face again. That was simply for my own preservation. In what underhand way have I

ever sought to injure you? I may have taunted you just now with your poverty; but when I saw you poor and miserable in London, I liked you—you know I did—better than if I'd met you at the height of one of your great successes. I don't know why—there's no good in me: it isn't that—but I do like a man best when he's down, and his coat's in rags, and his face white with want. If I'd ever loved any one, which I've not, it would have been a man at such a pass; and then I believe I would have given up a house and name, and everything else, to go and work for him,—till I got tired of it all! I behaved very well to you that day; I sat with you while you dined, bore with your sullenness and your threats, told you my name and everything about me, and took twenty pounds from the lining of my dress for you on the spot. Oh, I know what your look means! It was to my interest to do all this. Granted; but I did it as few women would have done—with good grace. I was as glad to sit with you there, in your ragged coat, as if you had been a duke. I didn't merely give you money, but advice; organized this little plant for you here in Brussels, wrote a letter of introduction for you on the spot—everything. And you have succeeded! It is six weeks since I met you: look what you were then, and what you are now."

"I know, I know," he interrupted, somewhat suddenly, and re-lighted his chibouk: "where's the good of making so much of all this?"

"Simply that you may see the wisdom of working with me, the utter folly of going against me, Jacques. I'm not afraid, as I told you. Summon Bernadin here; betray me, one or both of you, and the day after I loose honour, name, money—all that I hold now. I'll take up something else—and make it pay, probably! I don't fail very often. But where would you be? What would you have to show as winnings on your game? A hundred pounds or so, if you bargained well, and had not had your head broken while you were telling your story, which is more than likely, and then an end of everything! A complete case, in short, of killing the goose that lays the golden eggs! Now, by acting with me," she glanced into his face rapidly, "with me and against all the rest—against Bernadin, Stretton, Bryanstone—look where you will be! The—the story Bernadin told you is one very difficult to prove: impossible, I may say, if it is to rest upon

his own word alone. Only two other people in the world could possibly identify me, you and——”

“And who besides? What do you stop for, Nita? No one is listening to you here.”

“But some one is walking up and down under your window: I’m sure of it. I have heard the same step for the last half-hour.”

“And what of it?” said the Count: “you are not getting superstitious, I hope, madame? You, with your magnificent constitution, to be haunted by ghosts already!”

“By ghosts? no,” she answered with a strange smile; “but by *revenants* of flesh and blood——Hush! wait quiet a minute, and it will return. No, for the first time, it has not. It was nothing, perhaps, after all——by *revenants* of flesh and blood, yes. Whom do you think I saw at the theatre to-night? You would never guess. Stretton: the only man whom, besides Bernadin, we have to fear.”

“What! *the* Stretton!” he exclaimed; “the banker’s clerk?”

“The Anthony Stretton of Frankfort,” she answered with a laugh. “You needn’t look so incredulous: I never mistook a face yet. I saw him clear, as I was leaving my box; and he saw me, and knew that I recognised him. Jacques, in such a pass as this, would you not be mad to abandon me? If my story is indeed a marketable article—which I doubt—do you think a wretch like this will not coin whatever profit is to be made by its sale? For what else is he here? For what was he watching me to-night? Jacques,” she went on, almost passionately, and clasping her hand suddenly upon her companion’s, “Stretton must never be allowed to speak: do you hear me? My ruin and yours will follow if Stretton comes across Mr. Bryanstone. It is the evidence that that coward I told you of—the Englishman, Farnham Lumley—has already from fear been forced to retract. Evidence blacker far than Bernadin’s wild story. You’ll help me, wont you? Stretton must never speak.”

The Count shifted himself away from her touch, and stood irresolute. From the dead, unbroken silence of the street came the muffled sound of the footsteps again, close beneath his windows; and the fancy struck him suddenly that they might be the footsteps of Stretton—of the man who was not to be allowed to speak! Without one spark of honour,

without a glimmering of the commonest rudimentary honesty; with a heart insensible to love, to gratitude, to human affection of any kind—St. Georges' feet had never yet approached that one dark path from which the mere animal instinct of the vilest shrinks. He had once by unfair play ruined a lad, who blew his brains out the next morning, and had eaten his breakfast quietly while they told him of the event; he had extorted money from numberless victims by threats of exposure worse than death; had carried these threats mercilessly into execution in such cases as he had not received his stipulated hush-money. From any direct personal violence, from any attempt, even in thought, upon the sanctity of another human being's life, want of temptation, or his weaker nature, or perchance some vague perception in this, if in nothing else, of good, had kept him free.

"Give the man money again, and let him go," he said, without meeting his companion's eye. "I'm not given to sentiment, but you *ought* to deal mercifully with him. He was an honest lad enough till we took him in hand, and in less than three weeks he was ruined! Don't hit him hard, now; you'll pull through without that, Nita. I only spoke of Bernadin as I did to frighten you. He believes you to be dead; I took good care of that, you may be sure."

She looked steadily into his face for some seconds. "Jacques," she remarked at length, "I hope you are telling the truth,—mind, for your own sake I hope it: just as for Stretton's sake I wish he had not come across me again. Look me in the eyes—so!—and tell me what your interview with Bernadin was like. I shall know if you lie by one syllable, and for yourself, and your own safety, I repeat this piece of advice to you—tell the truth."

"Why should I tell you anything but the truth?" answered the Count; but he turned away uneasily from her gaze. "What interest have I in forging lies about this man Bernadin? You gave me a clue to finding him in Paris. I found him; and with enormous dexterity contrived, while pretending to be interested in a totally different affair, to bring in Honoria Forrester's name."

"And he answered," she interrupted, hurriedly, "he answered—what? Go on: I want no preamble of yours."

"He answered," replied St. Georges, "by a string of such curses as I never before heard bestowed by any human being

in my life. 'You know her!' he said, at last—Heavens, in what a voice!—"you know whether that woman still lives or not?" I answered that you were dead: that you had been mixed up in the history and the ruin of some of my intimate friends in London—for I thought this at once made my story sound life-like—and to my certain knowledge had died of decline, the family complaint, nearly a year ago."

"Go on."

"There is little more to say. Supposing that I had known the whole family story, which I did not, Monsieur Bernadin told me sufficient of his old love affairs, and of his marriage, to make me see that my best wisdom lay in remaining taciturn. An over-anxious word or look might have aroused his suspicions respecting me; but I managed him, as I told you, with my habitual adroitness, and even got out of him—my poor little Nita! here is the crowning-point that I have been keeping back from you so long—even got out from him the excellent piece of news, that he himself is going to leave Europe! On the thirtieth of this present month of March, Monsieur Bernadin sails from London for Algeria, where he is appointed one of the chiefs of police, and will remain, unless he happily dies of fever at once, for years."

The blood rose into Mrs. Bryanstone's face. "Jacques, do you swear all this?" she cried. "Bernadin going away for years! God! it is too good! and at this very moment, too!"

She moved aside: she hid her face away for a minute or two, then turned round, and smiled at him. "Something tells me you are not lying to me, Jacques, something stronger than reason, that I've been consulting for the last two minutes. When we were children I always knew by a turn of your eyebrows when you were speaking truth or not; and I don't think your face has quite lost the old trick yet. At all events—perhaps because I see no better course," she put in lightly—"I do believe you. Stupid fool!—Bernadin, my friend, not you—so he curses me still, does he, for that poor little monkey trick I played him once? What a comedy it must have been to see you together! Is he changed, I wonder? Describe him. He was tolerably good-looking when I saw him last, three years and a half ago."

"He was," the Count answered, "the most utter wreck of a man that it was possible to conceive. A man probably not

more than thirty, but bowed down like a man of eighty; fearfully attenuated, and with strange premature patches of white mingled with his brown hair."

Honorio listened to these details attentively, neither with an expression of pity nor of triumph, simply attentively, then shrugged her shoulders, supposed the air of Vincennes had not agreed with him, and fell back to talking of Stretton. "You are very charitable in your views," she remarked, when St. Georges had again suggested the expediency of buying him off; "but allow me to ask how you suppose I am to meet all these demands? For you, I say, as I said that day I saw you in London, I will do what I can, and as long as I can. Never mind why. Because we were starving children together once; because I have been your comrade only, never sickened by hearing a word of love from your lips; because, if you will, I fear you too much to refuse. To you I will keep my promise. To Stretton"—a singular veiled light shot across her eyes—"I will keep it too. When I bought him off, before my marriage, I told him it was for the last time. I warned him, as he valued his own life, never to come across my path again. He has come across it, and the result be on his own head! I will not give him more money; he shall not make money by his knowledge elsewhere: I swear it."

"But give him time," said the Count, laying aside his pipe nervously, and with genuine agitation on his handsome, indolent face; "these sort of things are always to be avoided; and—and—the law, in short, and——"

"And if you are afraid, say so, and have done with it!" cried Honorio, with a laugh. With your tragedy-airs you look as though I was going to kill Mr. Stretton with my own poor little hands." (They were not at all little. The Count glanced at them, even now, in their strong white muscular beauty, and shuddered.) "Of course I shall see him—of course I shall try to bring him to reason; and if he will go away quietly, so much the better for him. Make money by his information he shall not."

"And supposing he will not go away," persisted St. Georges, who knew her too well not to understand the significance of those words, "how, in God's name! do you propose to stop his mouth? Madame, you have conducted affairs enough of this kind already. For a few idle words against you you got Molinos killed in a duel—that was no duel, *ma foi*!—the boy



had never handled a sword six times in his life. As a simple matter of prudence you sold Bernadin, who had never wronged you, to worse than death. Be advised; such things are not repeated for ever with impunity."

He was more agitated than she had ever seen him. His hand shook, the moisture stood thick around his lips.

"Don't be afraid, don't be afraid, Count;" this was the answer. "You shall not be implicated, whatever I do. The guilt shall all rest upon my own shoulders. Guilt—what guilt?" she interrupted herself, fiercely. "If a man who has been warned puts his head into the cage of a tigress, is the guilt hers if he suffers? What right, if you come to the high moralities, has Stretton to thrust himself across my life? I met him once—years ago, and during the time I knew him his own weak nature led him into ruin. Does that time constitute me—do these three weeks out of a year, dead and gone ages ago, constitute me his debtor for ever! I injured him, or so he thinks, and I've paid him since for the injury. We are more than quits. Let him take heed now of injuring me. It is a question, as far as I am concerned, of simple self-defence. I have struggled hard—not harder than young women of the world do—for a certain position, and have gained it, and will hold it at any cost, and, in my way, be true to it. Let Stretton, or any other man, beware, who seeks, unprovoked, to meddle with me or mine!"

She took her cloak, threw it round her shoulders, and held out her hand. "Good night, child, and please don't look so frightened! It quite spoils the *tableau* of the exquisite, calm, impassive Count St. Georges. To-morrow, if I can, I'll see you again, and we'll talk more about Bernadin and his wonderful communications to you. Good night."

But St. Georges never saw her outstretched hand. Mrs. Bryanstone's exposition of her views concerning the "high moralities" had affected his nerves to the last degree. In what did he differ so much from Anthony Stretton? he asked himself. He had betrayed to her his knowledge of Bernadin's secret. What was to keep her from carrying out the pretty metaphor of the tigress in her cage with him? for upon the sentimental memories of childhood and comradeship, St. Georges, I need hardly say, placed just as much reliance as they were worth. How could he know that all this open re-

solve against Stretton might not be a blind for some stealthy blow about to be dealt to himself?

"Whatever you resolve upon, Nita, remember that I am your friend—your ally, if you like it better—and that I will stand by you in everything. Good night," and now he did take her firm, warm hand into his suddenly cold one. "Shall I see you home, or have you a carriage waiting?"

"I have no carriage waiting, and you shall not see me home," said Honoria, cheerily. "Why, Jacques, do you think that I, Nita, am such an aristocrat already that I can't walk along a mile or so of quiet streets at midnight? I shall just run quick along the Rue de Marais, and at the corner of the Rue d'Or and the Rue de la Montagne take a fiacre, so as to arrive home in due state before the porter of the hotel. Good-bye, child, and don't let your fancy run away with dreams of ghosts and phantoms."

She glided away from his side, and in another minute St. Georges watched her cross the boulevard and turn down the corner of the street immediately opposite his house. The steps that in his fancy he had supposed to be Anthony Stretton's were no longer to be heard.

CHAPTER XXXIII.  
A MIDNIGHT ALLIANCE.

THE deserted streets of Brussels were light as at noon-day under a brilliant winter moon. Drawing the hood of her opera-cloak over her head, Honoria commenced her walk with the quick firm tread, the quiet unconscious mien, that at such an hour and alone, only a woman who is, or has been, a daughter of the people, can assume. A well-born woman might—by bare possibility, of course—find herself in precisely such a position as Honoria was now; but if you met her you would know her at once by the nervous haste, the cast-down face, the eyes that *would* turn, constantly, to see that none were following or watching. Honoria walked with step as firm, with head as erect as any peasant-girl returning at sunset from the milking-field; as simply ignorant of fear as she used to be when she was a half-starved child of fourteen running home along the Paris streets at midnight a dozen years before.

She had, in truth, far graver things to think of than occupy the minds of women who can remember to be frightened. Bernadin lived. Bernadin had told the story of his life, or the portion of it vitally concerning her, to St. Georges. What reliance was she to place upon the seeming good faith of the Count? How could she know—was it even likely, she questioned herself, that he had made Bernadin believe in her death?

Bernadin—Bernadin—the name seemed to echo through her brain till it was on fire. She remembered how once, in a certain moment of agony, Bernadin had said these, or like to these words: "I will never forget you. I will live to betray you, as you have betrayed me." Remembered the look, the tone, the gesture that accompanied them, as though it had been yesterday. He was no weak dupe to be led by his own

passions like Stretton; no dandy sybarite to be bought off with toys like St. Georges. Loyal, brave, true, Bernadin had twice been betrayed by her; purely and wholly for her own convenience, and in cold blood. And her heart turned sick at the thought of what, if the hour ever came, the inexorable vengeance of such a man would be.

"Fool ever to have believed him dead!" she cried bitterly to herself. "Fool to have thought that a year or two of the worst dungeon in France could do more than blanch his hair and harden his pitiless heart! And doubly, trebly fool now, if I believe that St. Georges has been faithful! that Bernadin will leave England in a week! O, that they had one life—all of them—and that for a moment I had a man's arm, and might strike!"

She clenched her hand at that thought, and a passionate exclamation (of course in French; the language in which she thought) left her lips.

"Madame!" exclaimed a voice, and a man's figure appeared suddenly out of a doorway, where, till now, it had been concealed in blackest shadow. "Rehearsing always! In your new life as a lady and an Englishwoman, keeping still, I perceive, to the old vulgar habits of the stage!"

"Anthony Stretton!" she answered, with admirable composure, and not swerving by an inch from her path. "Spying always! In spite of oaths and of bribes, keeping true still to the vile instincts of all your miserable life! Where is the promise you gave me? Where is the warning that I was to have before you dared thrust yourself before my sight again?"

"Nita," answered Stretton, for it was he—the Count's fancy had been a true one—"if I had found you any way but how I have found you, I'd have kept dark altogether. I swear it. I came back to England because, like the miserable, unlucky devil I am, I lost all my money before I had been in New York a month; and as soon as ever I was in London the old madness came on me again, and I said, 'I must see her face, if I die for it.' If I had found you living quiet and respected with your husband, I swear to heaven I'd not have molested you. I love you enough not to do that still; and if I had felt I must get a word or two with you, I'd have written a line and warned you as I promised. Well, instead of that, what do I find?"

"What?" she echoed, stopping short; she had continued her walk until now, and looking him fiercely in the face. "Am I not living 'quiet and respected,' as I think you called it, with my husband?"

"No, you're not," he answered doggedly. "You've got him into trouble already—you see I've found out all about you, through sources of my own in London. He's been at death's door through fighting some duel your accursed face got him into; and now, here, when you should be watching by the sick bed you brought him to, you're philandering after that scoundrel St. Georges again—curse him! If you call this living quiet with your husband, I don't. I'm a blackguard, no doubt, as you've often told me, but I've my ideas on some points. If I'd found you going on steady, and you'd have helped me, Nita, with a hundred or so again, I'd have kept as quiet as you choose. But now that you've taken your course, I shall take mine. You're not going to have husband and lover both, and the poor devil you brought to ruin kicking about the world without food to his mouth! So much I swear to you."

For a minute Honoria was silent; then she laid her hand softly upon the man's arm. "Anthony," she said, in a changed voice, "do you mean to say you still care enough for me to be jealous?"

Her touch, her tone, the look of her face, softened as it was in the moonlight, thrilled through every fibre of Anthony Stretton's heart. "Do I care for you? do I love you as madly as ever?" he answered, seizing her hand and carrying it to his lips. "Why, Nita, I'd go round the world for you, and you know it! I'd do anything you told me—lead any dog's life you willed, if you'd only let me think that some day—never mind when, years and years off, perhaps—you'd look at me again with any of the old kindness in your eyes!"

"Hush, hush!" she interrupted him, firmly taking away her hand. "Speak low, and don't talk any of this kind of rubbish, for you know I never could, and never can stand it. I ask you, do you still care enough for me, as a friend, to be jealous? You answer 'yes.' Good. I ask you, next, will you do a service for me? Anthony," she went on after a minute's pause, "you have come at a strange time—a time when I am beset by enemies, when I don't know which way

to turn for counsel! And, if you will, you can serve me."

Her voice faltered a little; the eyes whose siren beauty for so many years had haunted this man, swam with tears. "I will do anything for you," he answered unhesitatingly; "anything. I'm no soft boy now, as I was when you first knew me. Whom do you want out of your way this time? St. Georges—eh, Nita? Has St. Georges been false, and do you want to be revenged upon him at last?"

He rubbed his hands together excitedly; and a strange fire glittered in his great eyes. Involuntarily Honoria glanced down the silent street, and saw with relief that she was within hail of two or three men who were standing beside a stand of fiacres.

"You are wrong—utterly wrong, Anthony. St. Georges never has been more than he is at this moment—the oldest comrade I have, the one human being who remembers my miserable childhood with me."

"And with a comrade—a companion, you spend hours alone at this hour?" he broke out fiercely. "Nita, take care how you lie to me! I tell you I'm no spoony boy now, as I was when you first saw and ruined me, but a desperate man, ready to commit any desperate action and bear the consequences. Do you hear the time?" As he spoke, the soft cathedral chimes were flooding the sleeping city with their pathetic record of another day's death. "Midnight. I told you that from ten till midnight was the time I'd return when I did return, and, mark you! I've kept my promise. I've been watching for you all the time you were with him. When you first went in you walked up to his side and he got up—I saw the outline of his head against the blind and knew him—knew him? blast him! wouldn't I know him out of a thousand? Wasn't he at your side the first night I ever saw you at those accursed tables? Well, it was nothing but a chance that kept me from going straight up to his room at that moment and putting an end to him—then and there. To him and to you too—and mind, I am equal to it!" He stretched out both of his arms threateningly towards her. "I've the strength of six men in me now, although I do look so ill and starved. But then I thought better of it, my poor Nita! I love you too much still really to harm you, and I waited for you—and have got you!" He took her hand again, whether she willed it or

not; "have got you, and will do you no harm! Only you know you must not, I say you must not, go near that scoundrel St. Georges again. If your husband does not look after you, I will. I wont leave you any more."

He caught her unwilling hand to his lips, and kissed it—kissed it repeatedly, but more with the famished sort of affection of a dog fawning upon his newly-found master than that of a sane man towards the woman he loved. Honoria, who, as he poured forth his last incoherent rage, had quietly managed to lead him another few paces down the street, saw with intense relief that the drivers on the cab-stand were already looking towards her companion and herself. Callous to danger as she was in all ordinary risks of life, there was a fire in Stretton's hollow eyes that thrilled her with sickening physical terror. A horrible foreboding overcame her that she had met with a strength greater than her own, at last. Lumley St Georges, Bernadin, were things of flesh and blood—men with human passions because with human reason still to work upon,—while *this* man!—

"Anthony," she whispered softly, and looking him steadily, for so she remembered to have heard a madman should be looked, in the eyes, "to prove to you that you are wrong—to prove to you that instead of lowering myself to love St. Georges, I regard him, old comrade as he is, with extremest suspicion, shall I tell you what favour it is I'm going to ask of you?"

"To get him out of the way!" he exclaimed vehemently. "I knew it, I knew it! Well, I wont ask why. I'll pretend to believe you. The handsome Count St. Georges is not your lover, never has been—but your friend, your comrade; and I, Anthony Stretton, the despised fool you spurned so long, am to put him away for you! When is it to be done, Nita?" Sinking his voice to a whisper, "To-night? I'm quite ready, quite. I know the house. I've spoken to the porter already, and he's an old man, and I'm strong. I've the strength of six men in me now. Shall it be to-night? One word, or if you don't like to say it, no word at all, and it shall be done. What does the law matter to me? If the law took me it must take you. Isn't the person who plans a man's death accessory to it? And we should die together! My little Nita, I wouldn't care a rush for it—the rope, and the drop, and the quick-limed grave in the jail and all—if I though *you'd* lie in the same

bed with me at last! that when you were cold and stiff, I, and no other man, should be near you! Don't shiver, child, What should make you shiver? I'll take care of you. I'll destroy your enemies. You shall never want a friend again now that Anthony Stretton's come back."

He held both her hands in a grasp like iron, and gazed with a kind of rapture at her face. Had she obeyed her wild instinct of terror, she would have screamed for help, and probably by that act would have sealed her doom at once: for Stretton had now worked himself into the precise state of exaltation at which a madman would take the life of his mistress with the same feeling of tenderness with which a man possessed of reason would kiss her lips. But, even in a position that froze her blood with animal affright, Honoria could think still. "He will *not* injure me;" these were the thoughts that passed across her brain, only with the clearness, the speed of lightning, very different to the clumsy translation of them into words. "Bryanstone would never judge me from a madman's ravings, even if he spoke, and, personally, the wretch likes me still. If I could only keep him like this! Keep him as a tool, as a watch upon St. Georges, till the danger of the next few days has passed!" And then aloud, "Anthony," she said, "if you care for me still, if you wouldn't ruin me utterly, never use these violent words again. I don't want St. Georges to die. His life can serve me better than his death. What I do want is that he should be watched—that you should watch him, Anthony. Will you do this for me?"

"I will do what you bid me; but he would be better out of the way. Dead men tell no tales. If St. Georges were gone, mine would be the only tongue that could harm you; and I—I shall never harm you more. Never! I've gone back to the old days, Nita, when the chestnuts were in flower, and I used to walk with you in the Homburg gardens. Every one turned to look at you as you passed. You were the handsomest woman there, and the wickedest; but it's all over now, or nearly over, and righteous and wicked 'll have to meet the judgment alike!"

"But, Anthony, you wander," she cried, with a shudder impossible to repress. "We are not talking of old days, but present ones. I'm in horrible difficulty, as I told you; and by watching St. Georges closely during the next few days



you can do me the greatest service. For the sake of what you once felt, wont you do this, Anthony? I'll like you better than I ever liked you yet if you will stand my friend?"

She turned away from him as though to hide her emotion; her voice trembled; she clasped her right hand over the one he held, in a piteous little gesture of entreaty. Anthony Stretton stood silent for two or three seconds: then he put her hands away from his, but gently, with none of the quick, convulsive movement that he used to her before.

"Nita," he said at last, with singular calmness, "do I hear you aright? If I help you to the uttermost, obey you like a dog—like a slave, you'll ever come to like *me*, Anthony Stretton? Let me hear you say that again. I suppose I must be mistaken."

"No, you are not mistaken," she answered firmly. "If you stand by me, if you bring me through the danger I now run, I'll like you—well, I'll like you as much as it's in me to like any one. Are you satisfied?"

"And you'll give up St. Georges?"

"Give him up? As an acquaintance, no. It would be impossible."

"But as a 'comrade' at whose lodgings you pay midnight visits, yes?"

"Yes. I will never visit the Count St. Georges again, if you wish it."

"Good. Now what do you desire me to do for you?" His tone was perfectly reasonable; his manner quiet, almost subdued. "You must tell me plainly, and I will obey you to the letter."

"What I want you to do is this," she answered, glancing quickly round her for an instant, and lowering her voice to a whisper. "For the next five days keep the Count St. Georges constantly under your sight. He has forgotten you, you may be sure; and disguised as you are there's no fear of his recollection of you awakening. Get a room near him, opposite him if you can, watch his comings and his goings, and give me notice in an instant if he attempts to leave Brussels. Above all, Anthony—are you listening?"

"I am listening to every word you say."

"Above all, watch for the possible arrival of a stranger, a Frenchman, at the Count's house. You—you—" her voice

faltered visibly, "could not mistake the appearance of the person I speak of. A tall, high-featured man of about thirty, but looking fifty or more, stooping in the shoulders, and with brown hair thickly patched with white. Will you remember this?"

"Yes; every word of it."

"Anthony, if that man comes to Brussels—if that man and St. Georges meet without my knowledge, I am lost! I can't tell you all the story now, so you must take my word for the truth of what I do say. This man was—is—must be always—my bitterest enemy! If he were gone from the face of the earth I could feel free. Never till then!"

"Oh! It was not St. Georges, then, but this man?" remarked Stretton, still in the same monotonous, quiet sort of tone. "Another 'comrade' for whom your fancy has cooled. Well, 'tis the same, quite the same to me! I shan't forget the description. Tall, high-featured, looks an old man at thirty, has brown hair thickly patched with white. You have no moral compunction as to *his* death, I suppose?"

"Did I not tell you he was my bitterest enemy?—that I should never be free until he was swept away from the earth? Compunctions! What fool do you think me grown, Anthony, that you should ask me such questions as these?"

He gave a low curious laugh at the sudden passionate indignation of her tone. "Fool! I must indeed be a fool myself to think that you would ever feel weakness or pity while you lived! Nita, I read in the paper the other day that some men—parsons, too—are trying to say there is no devil and no hell after all; and they hold to it so firmly they give up their livings sooner than preach the contrary. I wonder whether they'd alter if they could know you?—know you as I've known you?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Anthony; I don't feel wicked, as good people always say they do. If men were honourable and would leave me alone, I don't think I should ever do anything bad again. But what's the good of talking?" she interrupted herself, half abruptly, "I shall be to the end what my life forces me to be—what I have been hitherto. It was all laid, you may depend upon it; the train of all this was laid long, long before you and I were born, perhaps; and what am I, what are you, but the chance matches that may be used to fire it? Good night," and now she gave him her hand, unsought. "Good night, and

remember your promise! Don't seek to come near me, but the moment you have anything to say, write to me at the Hôtel des Pays-Bas, in an unsigned note, and using no names. Above all, Anthony, remember this, be prompt in whatever you do, and I will not forget you afterwards. Do you want money now? Of course you do. I ought to have remembered it sooner."

"No, no, no!" he cried, as she was about to take something from her pocket. It was a rule of Honoria's life never to be without an ample supply of ready cash. "Not a farthing! I've taken money enough from you before; but not now. I don't undertake this kind of work for money, Nita."

"As you will," she answered carelessly, and returning her purse to her pocket. "I thought, perhaps, after your voyage, your funds might have been low. I am glad it is not the case. Good night, again; or rather, *au revoir*."

But when she was in the fiacre, and had driven away from the sight of his face, as it stared after her, white and desperate in the moonlight, the thought of his words did stab her with an acute pain. Between that wretch and herself lay an immeasurable gulf. All the difference that lies between a man and a tiger. He was capable of human love, human jealousy, human self-respect, even yet. And she . . .

Lost in her own thoughts, Honoria alighted at the door of the hotel, dismissed the fiacre, and was running rapidly up the centre staircase of the house, when a door on the first floor was suddenly opened, and Bryanstone, with a face like stone, stood before her.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

## PUT INTO THE WRONG ENVELOPE.

OF all the men and women who mourned over Henry Bryanstone's marriage, Laura Hamilton's grief had been perhaps the most profound. He wrote her as generous, as tender a letter as a man could write three days after his marriage, but she never answered it. She *could* not have written to him as Honoria Forrester's husband. Her heart was crushed, dead, hopeless of resurrection under the bitterness of his loss. Until she reaches thirty, with a future still possible, a woman may rally from any love-affair. With youth gone, what has she to do but succumb, mutely, uncomplainingly, just as she succumbs to the other scarcely less fearful loss of youth itself?

Laura Hamilton made no sign. She was staying in a country house full of people at the time the news of Henry Bryanstone's marriage first reached her, and for one day and night no eye looked upon her in her despair; then she appeared again, admirably calm and self-possessed. Would it not have been a too delicious amusement to all her friends to see a woman of her age sentimentalising? Surprised! Well, perhaps she was less surprised than any one else at the marriage. It was easy to see from the first that poor Miss Forrester was desperately in love with Mr. Bryanstone. Should say she would make him a very good wife. Thought it wrong of Letty to be so violently prejudiced against the poor thing. Hoped the family would not think her, Laura Hamilton, to blame in the matter; for, indeed, she had nothing, or next to nothing, to do with helping it on. And then—then, when night came, this woman would spend the black hours in grief too wild for tears; an impotent rage against the rival who had outwitted her; in fierce hatred, ever to be succeeded by revulsions of the old passionate

tenderness for Bryanstone himself. And so she lost her flesh, and the last remaining looks of youth; and all her friends said, in spite of her good acting, how ridiculous it was that a person of dear Laura's age could not accept the situation like a woman of the world instead of a baby.

Anything but his marriage. She felt now, as she had felt during all the years of her attachment to him, that she could have sustained anything else than that. She had no right to his fidelity. She could have borne—had she not borne?—any and every other desertion of her with a friend's constancy and long-suffering. But with his marriage the very core, the very gist of her life was gone. She could foresee so exactly the way in which they must meet now. When he had been wearied by the outer world, hitherto, Bryanstone's refuge had been at her fireside. Wearied at his wife's fireside now (she never thought he would love Honoria; she was not jealous in the mere commonest acceptation of the word), his refuge would be in the world—his world, that is to say, of men, and of men's pursuits. And she, any way, would be nothing; she, who for years had had no thought save to minister to every wish, every passing whim of this man she had made a god of!

There are whole classes of human griefs that, I remark, meet with scanty sympathy either in life or in books. Any emotional or sentimental demonstration in maturity is certainly one of these. People cannot, for the life of them, believe in the love-pangs of a man of forty, or of a woman over twenty-nine. Let them lose their money, or be balked in their ambition, and you may possibly sympathise with them. Love, and all belonging to love, is for the young; ridiculous in everybody else; and whatever in such matters strikes the majority with a sense of unfitness, is probably unfit. Middle-aged men and women who make gushing, emotional demonstrations *are* ridiculous. Don't they suffer as much as the young? Well, if they do, they must not show their sufferings. And Laura was sufficiently a woman of the world to know this; and finding, as the months went on, that she could neither get over her disappointment, nor make her friends believe that she had got over it, she one morning quietly put her house in Bruton Street into the hands of an agent, and went away alone—yes, without even the maid who had waited

upon her, and so remembered her in the days when she knew Bryanstone—to Brussels.

This was some time before his return with his bride to England. Two months later, when Bryanstone was carried into Brussels, as his friends thought, a dying man, Mrs. Hamilton was already the fashion there, living in a charming house close to the park; entertaining twice a week; and with several spendthrift members of the Belgian aristocracy quite prepared to give her their title if she would undertake to pay their debts.

With the first sudden news of Bryanstone's danger she had gone straight to his hotel—pride, jealousy, all but the old love for him gone—and had implored to see him, and be allowed to nurse him, at least till his wife should arrive. But Martin, a stern woman-hater always, and bitterer than ever against the whole sex now, as being the cause of his master's accident, as of all other mischief, had sent her away roughly from the hotel. In her despair she went to the surgeons, and received the same answer from them both. She could on no account see Mr. Bryanstone. It was doubtful if they would allow him even to see his wife—how the distinction stabbed her!—in his present state. And so all Laura had to comfort her day after day was the same short answer, accompanied by the same shrug of the shoulders, when, after hours of patient waiting, she could succeed in waylaying one of the surgeons as he left the hotel, or, more rarely still, could exchange a word or two with the potentate of the sick-room—Martin himself.

This went on for the first few days. Then Honoria arrived and Mrs. Hamilton saw her. Mrs. Bryanstone did not at all want her husband to die. She hoped sincerely he had made some provision for her if he did die; and, whether he had or not, she felt that, in having gained the right to wear his name, not to mention the positive possession of all his family jewels (which she did not neglect to bring with her to Brussels), she would not have spent the last six months in vain. Still, for every reason, she would very much rather that he lived; and she acted her part so prettily, and shed such natural tears, and spoke of "her Henry," and that horrid duel that his great love for her had led him into, with such tenderness, that Laura went away, feeling the bitterness of death in her own

heart, and believing, as she had never done before, that Bryanstone had not only made Honoria Forrester his wife, but had given her his love too. A week or so later, Nelly Bertram arrived. In a fortnight the Anglo-Brussels world began to whisper, first, that Mrs. Bryanstone saw a good deal of her handsome *protégé*, the young Count St. Georges; secondly, that Bryanstone, in his convalescence, was being nursed by a young and lovely Englishwoman; and, lastly, what would fill three closely-printed pages of the extraordinary and circumstantial details which the British imagination seems ever ready to supply, in every contingency of life, for its compatriots.

After this, Laura Hamilton contented herself with leaving a card every week or so, with a stately inquiry for Bryanstone's health, at the Hôtel des Pays-Bas. And she began to receive again, for the first time since he was wounded, and to extend encouragement as before to such needy Belgian barons as were ready to show her attention, and to drive, and dine, and dress, and say cynically to her own heart how little she cared either for Mr. Bryanstone's infidelity to herself, or his fancy for this new face, which men said enabled him now to support his wife's levities. And all the time Bryanstone, weak in body, harassed in mind, did not even know that Laura Hamilton was in Brussels. It was no interest of Honoria's to bring any old friends about him just now; and Martin would as soon have thought of voluntarily conveying poison as any card or message pertaining to a woman to his master's sick-room.

"And who is giving the fancy-ball, Nelly?" Bryanstone asked, as he and Miss Bertram were sitting together, after Mrs. Bryanstone had started in her pearls and velvet to the Opera, and Nelly had spoken to him about a wish of Honoria's that she should be present at this one piece of gaiety before her return. "I don't even know the name of Mrs. Bryanstone's Brussels acquaintance."

"The name of this one is Mrs. Hamilton," said Nelly, looking up from her work to Bryanstone's face. "A very old friend of yours, Honoria said; and I think she must be, Mr. Bryanstone, for yesterday, as I was coming in with Marie, this lady drove up to the door, and asked how you were so kindly, and looked and looked at me, till I felt quite shy. Is she a nice person? Is she really a friend of yours?"

"Mrs. Hamilton is one of my greatest friends, Nelly," answered Bryanstone; "but I can't understand her being in Brussels, and not coming to see me. Are you sure that was the name? What sort of looking woman was the one you saw?"

"A pale, dark woman, not young at all,—thirty or forty, I should think. I'm quite sure the name was Hamilton, for I looked at the invitation to-day. Most likely it's among Mrs. Bryanstone's notes still." And rising from the low ottoman where she was at work beside him, Nelly drew forth a plate full of cards and opened notes that stood on the table, and began to search among its contents.

"Here it is," she cried, "I remember the colour of the envelope, and the peculiar handwriting. It is not like a lady's, is it?" holding the note out to Bryanstone.

"It is hers," he answered, recognising Laura's fine, firm hand in an instant. "Well this is strange. I would not have believed Laura Hamilton would have known me to be at death's door without coming to see me. But you say you did meet her at the door? Perhaps she has been here before, and that scoundrel Martin never told me of it. I must see her and have it all out at once. Sending *me* a formal invitation to a fancy ball!"

And then he opened the note.

Nelly's eyes were bent down over her work again, and for a minute, or more, she kept them there silently. When she looked up Bryanstone was putting in his breast-pocket the note he had taken from Laura Hamilton's envelope. His face looked suddenly changed, and deadly white.

"Mr. Bryanstone, you are tired, sir. Please let me ring for Martin at once. The doctors both say I must never let you stop up after I see you getting pale, and you look so pale now!"

But Bryanstone caught Nelly's hand as she was turning away towards the bell. "I am not a bit tired," he said; not at all in the docile tone in which he was used to submit to Miss Bertram's mandates; "and I don't want Martin. I shall be up late to-night. When did she get that note, child? Tell me quick."

"What note? I don't understand you, sir." She was, in truth, scared by his altered face and tone. "The invitation to the ball came two or three days ago."



"When did Mrs. Bryanstone show it to you?"

"To-day, I think. Yes, I remember, Marie brought in some other letter, that came by post, just as we had been looking at it."

"And Mrs. Bryanstone read that other letter?"

"She did, sir, with this one in her hand. She said it was only a bill, and there was no answer, and put it in her pocket."

"And afterwards?"

"Oh! afterwards she went on talking about the fancy ball, I suppose, but I don't remember exactly."

"You remember quite enough, Nell, dear. I see it all perfectly plain. Mrs. Bryanstone only put her notes into the wrong envelopes."

"What? that is not Mrs. Hamilton's invitation, then?"

"No," said Bryanstone, quietly, "this is the bill! And as bills ought not to be left about, I have put it into my pocket. Get my pipe ready for me, Nelly; make up the fire—if your hands are big enough to wield those huge logs yonder—and then come and sit by me, and don't work. What shall I do without you, my poor little Nell?" he went on, as she obeyed him in her quick, noiseless way. "How shall I feel when I am here by myself, this day week?"

"I needn't go unless you wish it. Uncle Frank can't be crosser than he is. I will stay, if you only say a word, till you have quite done with me."

"That will never be, Nelly. If you could stay with me for years I should want you still—want you more than at first. But you are going next Wednesday. Le Roi has told me of an escort for you,—his sister, Madame Schmidt, who is taking her own daughter to London."

"Oh, Mr. Bryanstone, please! I don't want any Madame Schmidt and her daughter! If you *will* send me away, let me go alone."

"No, Nelly. You shall go, and you shall go under Madame Schmidt's escort. Poor little Nelly," he went on kindly, "'tis bad enough to have brought you at all into such a place as this—the least I can do now is to send you away in the best charge I can find! Shall you ever look back to this time, I wonder, Miss Bertram? When you are a grown-up woman, and married to some lucky fellow or

another, will you ever look back to the good work you once did for a sick and captious man here in Brussels?"

Miss Bertram came in a moment, and took her place by his side: "Mr. Bryanstone, I shall remember you always, and I shall never marry, as I often told you before. I—I—"

"Go on. You don't see anything in the married happiness you witness to make you anxious to try the experiment personally?"

"Not at all, sir. I know that I could never love any man enough again to be able to pass my life with him—but why do we talk of these subjects?" she interrupted herself hastily, and turning away her face from Bryanstone's eyes. "There are other things to look forward to in life besides marrying and being given in marriage. I think . . . yes, I do—that it would make me as contented as I ever wish to be, if I could hear that all your trouble was at an end, and that you and Mrs. Bryanstone were living happily together."

"Is that quite true, Nelly?"

"Look at me and see, Mr. Bryanstone. Do I look as if I was saying anything false?" And she lifted her poor white face bravely up to his. "I've hardly any friends, you know. You are the first real friend I've had, besides Uncle Frank, and to know that you were happy would give me all the pleasure that I am capable of. You may believe me."

"Nelly, child, I do believe you."

He took her hand; drew her to him suddenly; and before she was aware of his intention had touched her cheek with his lips. "This is our parting, Nell, dear," he said, in answer to the silent reproach he read in her eyes. "I shall see you again, of course, often, between this and the day you go, but I'm saying 'good-bye' to you now, because from to-night I shall have other things to think of and to do—things with which I would not like my last thoughts of you to be mixed. You have been the best, most patient little nurse—but I won't offend you by offering you any thanks. Tell me you forgive me all the times I've been impatient, and all the long stories of my own affairs that I've bored you with, and give me one kiss of your own free will, Nelly. I stand in sore need of it to-night, if you only knew."

"But Nelly's white cheeks were dyed scarlet: the hand that Bryanstone held turned cold and death-like in his clasp.

"Mr. Bryanstone," she stammered, "you forget I'm not a little girl, though you think me one. I—I—"

And then the wonderful transfiguration that can make the plainest woman beautiful shone across Nelly's face. And as she knelt there before him Bryanstone saw it; and knew all her secret in an instant.

"Nelly, if you will treat me like a great lady, not like my patient kind nurse of old days, tell me this, at least—that you forgive me any weariness, any pain that I have caused you?"

"Forgive you? O, Mr. Bryanstone—"

She started up to her feet; stood a moment irresolute; then stooped and touched his forehead with her lips. The wish to obey him to the last conquering shame, pride, all the hosts of instincts that make a very young girl's first caress, even when accorded to the man she may legitimately love, so fierce a struggle to her.

"Don't call me a great lady again, please. I'm your nurse, your friend, and nothing else. Good-bye, sir."

And then she left him.

It was two hours later than this that Mrs. Bryanstone saw her husband's face advancing to meet her as she entered.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

## BROUGHT TO BAY.

SHE followed him without a word into a room, as his gesture bade her do; and for the first time since the duel Bryanstone and his wife were alone. For a minute there was a dead silence; then Honoria, who knew from his face what kind of scene was coming, resolved boldly to take the initiative and speak.

"What! alone, Henry?" For in a matter of this kind all women, whether clever or obtuse, Amelias or Beckys, seize intuitively upon the right weapon of counter-attack. "Really, I did not think that Nelly *ever* left you alone of an evening?"

"Nor does she," answered Bryanstone with excessive calmness. "It is not evening now: it is past midnight; and I have waited here alone because I wished to speak to you."

"To me?"

"To you. I wished to tell you that you shall not return from the Count St. Georges' house to mine after to-night. Do you understand?"

"I have been to the theatre—I went to see Madame de Plessy afterwards"—she stammered.

"Don't trouble yourself to make unnecessary statements," interrupted Bryanstone, with the look that she knew too well gathering about his lips—the same look that she had seen there the night that Letty threatened to turn her into the streets. "You have been by M. St. Georges' request to his house, and have returned from it to mine at midnight. I want to use no hard words. I want no explanations with you. But simply understand this: you will not act in the same way again. As long as you still make use of the protection of my roof you will not dishonour it openly."

"Dishonour?"

"Yes, dishonour. Do you want a plainer word? A woman

returning, alone, at this hour from the house of her lover cannot, I should think, complain of 'dishonour' as too harsh a term."

"I complain of it as more than harsh—as utterly, cruelly untrue!" cried Honoria, with a burst of passion for which Bryanstone was unprepared. "Henry, things have gone on too long like this with you and me. We will have plainer speaking now. You have tired of me, no doubt, as men do tire of women lower than themselves who are unhappy enough to marry them. You have ceased to treat me as your wife. You make no pretence of hiding your preference for other society than mine. But you have no right—you have no right, sir, to insult me with a suspicion like this! I will not bear it, even from you."

"Suspicion!" echoed Bryanstone, with a grim sort of smile. "Suspicion! Have you, or have you not, been at St. Georges' house to-night?"

"I have been there!" cried Honoria, across whose mind a horrible recollection was flitting of the moment she had received the Count's note, and the possibility of having transferred it to the wrong cover. "If you had let me finish speaking I was going to tell you. I went to the theatre; then to Madame de Plessy's, and afterwards to St. Georges'. What should I stoop to tell you a falsehood about it for?"

"It would have done little good if you had," answered Bryanstone, "as I have happened to read the Count St. Georges' own note making the appointment. Allow me to return it to you, and advise you for the future to keep such letters with better care." And he took the note from his pocket, and laid it on the mantelpiece close beside her hand.

Then Honoria, who till now had been standing with downcast eyes, and gazing, or pretending to gaze, into the fire, lifted her head up suddenly and confronted her husband full. "Mr. Bryanstone," she said steadily, "I am not deceiving you in this. You may believe me."

He was silent.

"I have been to St. Georges' house to-night, by appointment, as you say. He wrote to me from Paris, asking me, unless he joined me at the theatre, to go and see him at his lodgings the night of his return, and I went. I stayed with him; talked over the old friends he had been seeing; smoked my cigarette with him—am I ashamed of it?—for more than

an hour. And you call this dishonour! You are accustomed to women of the world, women of birth and education, Henry, and you don't know along how narrow a path a daughter of the people, *femme artiste* like me, can walk without fear of falling. If I was a woman like your own sister, or like Mrs. Hamilton, you would be right. I could *not* have visited St. Georges innocently. But remember who I am, and what my bringing up was, before you condemn me as you would condemn them."

She was a thorough actress always; but there was more than acting in her voice now. For once she spoke the truth; and Bryanstone, little cause as he had to trust in her faith, could not but acknowledge to himself that in this he did believe her.

"What you are, what your bringing up was, I know nothing of," he answered. "You may be telling me the truth or not. I would rather believe you are; for I don't think you fool enough to risk putting yourself in any man's power just now. But what alone concerns me is, that you should avoid all appearance of infamy as long as you remain under my protection. You understand?" And he half-turned, as if to leave the room.

But Honoria moved a step before him, and laid her hand upon his arm. "Henry," she cried, "whatever I am, or have been, I deserve one thing from you—justice. Whatever you suspect me of, let me, like the meanest criminal in your country, have the right to speak. Don't cast me from you unheard. Have you"—in the genuine agitation of the moment; before the unutterable danger of the step she was about to take; her face grew almost livid—"Have you—after all—been told of the shame of my life! of—of—the dancer, Nita? Speak. Let me hear my judgment from your own lips and no other!"

"I have heard all," exclaimed Bryanstone, totally thrown off his guard by this unlooked-for avowal; "and I pronounce no judgment on you save that which you must know to be inevitable—our separation. I don't ask you why you deceived me," he went on hurriedly, as she would have offered to speak. "I seek no unravelment of the past dark story of your life. You have been my wife. God knows no harsh words are needed to widen the breach between us two now! Confess the truth to me simply. Say that, as an adventuress who had

been a ballet-dancer in her youth, an adventuress whose very name at the German gambling-tables became afterwards a byword of infamy"—his lips trembled convulsively—"you have made shipwreck of my life; and as much as it's in my power to forgive I'll forgive you. The world shall never openly know the story of your shame—great heavens!—and of mine too!" he interrupted himself, in a broken voice. "An allowance that will keep you in respectability shall be paid to you half-yearly, and—"

"And how, and by what right do you dare to cast me from you, sir?" she cried, with genuine passion lighting up all her handsome face. "I confess that I deceived you. I confess that Nita Forrester was a dancer; was, after she left the stage for ever, an *employée* for a single season at the Homburg tables—and this is all! How shall you or any other man dare to say that her name was a byword of infamy? It was not, it was not! And, even in her grave, my unhappy sister shall not be maligned while I live and have a tongue to defend her."

"Your sister?" stammered Bryanstone, under his breath. "Nita Forrester—your sister?"

"I thought you told me that you had heard all, Mr. Bryanstone? All the fearful, loathsome shame," she added bitterly, "of being married to a woman whose dead sister, in her youth, earned her bread by the stage. It is a foul dishonour for you, is it not?"

"Dishonour!" repeated Bryanstone, mechanically, "I—I—there has been some mistake. It is not of your sister I have heard."

"If you have heard of Nita the dancer, you have heard of my sister," she exclaimed vehemently. "I will never tell another lie concerning her from this day forth. Why this secret," she added, a wonderful inflection of pathos stealing into her voice, "this secret has been my misery for all these long months past, Henry! Since we married have you ever seen me natural; have you heard me talk unreservedly of the past, or of any of the scenes to which you have taken me? Never. You know it. I have read that knowledge in your face a hundred times; and now I will tell you why. Because, day and night, waking and sleeping, I was always afraid of my secret coming suddenly to light, and your anger on discovering it. Henry, I deceived you basely. I ought never to have

let you bring me, the sister of a ballet-girl, into an honourable English family. But remember, the temptation was great, for I loved you!"

She had overshot her mark. Bryanstone knew that she had never loved him; and in the revulsion of a moment the glimmering of a new light seemed to break upon his mind. "I never heard your sister's name mentioned save with respect," he said slowly, and looking steadily up and down her features as he spoke. "From the time when, as a young girl, she entered the Miss Jarvises' school, until the moment that she died, as Bernadin's neglected wife, your sister's life seems to have been passed without a stain. It is of you, madam! of you, Nita the dancer—my wife now—that I have heard."

He saw that her fingers closed convulsively upon each other; that for a moment her breath came so thick as to choke back the power of speech. This was all; and, innocent or guilty, what woman living would not show some signs of mere physical emotion at such a moment?

"I—I?" she gasped, when utterance returned to her. "Why, the accusation is absurd, monstrous. I can bring evidence as to every year of my life. The Miss Jarvises will speak for me. I have letters—letters of Nita's in my possession. Henry, you do not, cannot have listened to anything so preposterously false as this?"

"I have not only had to listen to it, but to suffer for it," he answered quietly, and laying his hand for a moment upon his wounded side. "Farnham Lumley, as you, I think, only too well know, remembered you at Homburg just as vividly as Sir Hyde Bryanstone remembered you, years and years before, upon the Paris boards."

She was silent for a minute, then she clasped her hands, sank down into a chair, and turned her face away with a sob. "I see it all," she murmured. "O, fatal likeness! oh, unhappy sister! Even from the grave you have been able to ruin my happiness——"

But it was getting more and more like acting, and Bryanstone's heart was becoming more and more rooted in its disbelief. "If you would listen to me!" she pleaded, as he remained ominously, rigidly silent. "If you would only listen to what I have to say. As I said just now, give me justice. Don't condemn me unheard."



"I shall condemn you as soon as I prove your guilt," said Bryanstone, coldly; "and no assertion of yours will change either my belief or my judgment. On the day I prove what I already know, that Nita the dancer and the woman I married are one, you separate from me for ever."

"On the day you prove it," she repeated, looking up at him, with a singular expression breaking over her face. "You are not sure then that I betrayed you? Henry, say that again! 'Tis something for my wretched heart to cling to in this horrible misery. You have not prejudged me. You will allow that Lumley—may my curse rest upon him!—and your uncle were possibly mistaken. Why, it's monstrous, monstrous!" she interrupted herself, starting up again to his side, and with a gesture, about whose passion there could be no mistake, clinging hold of his arm. "Don't you know that Lumley has good reason for spreading about these infamies? don't you know that I betrayed my promise to him when I married you?"

"I know this," answered Bryanstone, freeing himself in a moment from her touch, and with the dangerous look that his face could take on rare occasions rising into his eyes. "I know this, that you sold me, doubly, infamously; as only such a woman as you could sell a man! Farnham Lumley had never any more intention of marrying you than I had—before my marriage morning!" he ended bitterly.

"Do you mean that as a taunt to me, Henry? It is well chosen—very. I could have expected no other. A woman who once lowers herself for a man puts a fearful weapon into his hands from that day forth for evermore."

"A woman who forgets herself for the man she loves, has for ever an additional claim upon him!" answered Bryanstone. "A woman who deliberately stakes her reputation against a man's money is—such a woman as yourself. You have never loved me, Honoria."

It was the first time to-night, it was the last time while she lived, that he called her by her Christian name; and, granite though she was, the word, somehow, struck on her lost heart like a knell: struck on it with the unutterable pathos that even the hardest human conscience must feel for what has been—and shall be no more!

"If I had loved him I had been saved yet!" she thought. "With a tithe of Nelly's love I should throw myself on his

neck and tell him all—and be forgiven! But that can never be. That is the only rôle struck off, by no fault of mine, from those that I am able to play. Henry," aloud, and with a certain dignity that was not without its eloquence, "I dare say you are right. I have not loved you as women of the world, women of your own rank, love. Still, in spite of this, in spite of my past life, and the little worth there is in me, I believe I might have been as true a wife to you as the highest born amongst them all. I should not have stooped to small deceits, at least. I should not have betrayed you with the thousand petty duplicities the thousand well-cloaked, pious frauds, with which some women of the world, some women of virtue, betray their husbands."

"Probably not," said Bryanstone, coldly. "You have too much ability to be false, save where a great interest was at stake."

"And too utter, too unspeakable a loathing of the life of such women ever to fall even into a semblance of their morality!" she cried out boldly. "I never thought to have said it, but as you are plain-spoken, so will I be. Your life stifles me, has stifled me from the first day I entered Mrs. Forsyth's service till now. You have been told, perhaps, by some of your kind friends, how I and my sister were brought up? How our father, a broken-down English gentleman, left his wife and children to starve, while he spent his days and nights in the gambling that ruined us. How, a few months after he died, literally on the streets, our mother, with these two wretched children for her attendants, perished slowly of consumption in a Paris attic, with straw for her bed, and hunger, and cold, and misery for her death-bed consolations. You have heard, perhaps, how, left alone and starving in the world, one of these children, through the charity of an English lady, was taken first as nurse-girl by herself, afterwards as pupil teacher in a school near London? how the other—my unhappy sister—by a far harder fate became a child-dancer, at ten sous a day, in one of the smallest theatres in Paris. Was such a childhood likely to fit me for the well-smoothed, soft life of a woman of the world? If I have failed in making my way into your sister's regards; if I have failed in making you happy, confess that the fault was hardly mine. A life of work was what my lot fitted me for, and the greatest mistake I ever made was in seeking to

change it for one of idleness, and gentle breeding, and luxury."

Bryanstone was silent for a minute or more, during which he continued steadily to watch his wife's face. At last he spoke: "If what you are now telling me was simple truth," he said, "if you had the candour to tell me that you had never loved me, but had foolishly sold your freedom for my money, and now repented of the bargain; if this was all, and you told it me with that voice, and looking as you did just now, I could have liked you better than I ever liked you yet! But this is foreign, all of it, to what I accuse you of. I say nothing of your birth, of your connexions, of your inability to make me happy. I ask you, for the last time, to confess (what I shall too soon prove) that the accusations which are brought against you are true. Do you mean to do so or not?"

"I—I—" for a minute she hesitated, an irrepressible impulse causing her to waver yet. "Which accusation do you want me to confess to?" she faltered.

"The first. I am willing, God knows, to pass over the darker infamy of the rest. Confess to me in any words, in writing if you will, that your youth was spent upon the stage, and I will deal with you as leniently, as generously, as I can."

"Put me away from you for ever, that is to say!" she exclaimed in reply. "Allow me so much a year for the rest of my life, and loneliness, and a suspected name, for what? For having earned my bread, as best I might, when I was a girl! Henry, I cannot confess to you what never was—and what, mind, you can never prove—neither can I do away the shame of which I am guilty in having connected you with a woman, dead and forgotten now, who was an opera-dancer in her youth. But this I say: if your suspicions were true; if, instead of Honoria the governess, you had married her sister Nita the dancer, I do not see that you would have had a right to look upon yourself and your family as degraded by such an alliance. No, listen to me," she went on, as he turned impatiently away from her; "I have a feeling that you and I will not have very much more to do with each other after to-night, and I think I've a right—yes, a right! let me be what I may—to make you listen to all I have to say. You can't think—you, a man of the world—that a ballet-

dancer is a woman spending her life (as the high-born ladies, who scrutinize her for their amusement from their boxes, pretend to believe) either in revelry and brilliant vice, or standing, bare-shouldered and smiling, with a heap of flowers at her feet. You know that the smiles are as much a part of the profession; often a harder, a ghastlier part to perform, than the steps. That the dancer whom the men applaud and the women envy will, in another minute, be led off the stage, quivering in every limb; with trembling distorted lips, with haggard eyes, bathed in painful sweats; swathed like a race-horse—to rest? No, to exercise herself; to be rubbed down; sponged, re-dressed, lest she should turn stiff and faint before the next act comes. You know, or you must have heard, how the days of such women are passed! In what tedious practice, what self-denial, what never-ending work, what cruel bodily suffering under the hands of an un pitying master! Worst of all, you must know how, at any time, oftenest long before their youth is passed, such women break down; and how the strength must be forced—the half-paralyzed nerves fired with hot irons, the flagging limbs blistered, the whole miserable worn-out frame goaded to the uttermost—unless they would see younger and fresher candidates taking away their bread and filling their place! Well, I say that this, in itself, is no more a life of infamy than is the life of some of the young girls whom I have seen in the world of honourable men and virtuous women. Each bares her shoulders and goes through night after night of wearisome exertion, with mock smiles on her lips, and heaviness at her heart, alike! Only in the day-time, when the one can rest, the other works and rehearses still. True, one receives her hired wages monthly, or weekly, from her employer; and the other looks to receiving hers in a lump, at the altar of St. George's. Each, according to her place, is working, with her best ability, for her own advancement; and as far as I can see, the shame, if there is any, is about equally divided. To have earned her living as an artiste, is not necessarily for a woman to have been degraded."

"Not necessarily," said Bryanstone, who had listened to her with rigid, unmoved patience. "But I am quite uninterested in generalisation, you must remember, and I am also excessively tired. Have you anything more to say?"

"I—I want to know what I have to expect?" All hope

of softening him or leading him from the mark choked back by the polite coldness of his tone. "Don't expose me—don't separate from me without warning!"

"Your warning is given you now," he answered. "I have offered you the chance of confession, and you reject it. On the day when I prove your identity with Nita Dupont the dancer, you separate from me for ever."

"And, after another week, that day can never come!" she thought, when a moment later he had left her alone. "Bernadin gone, the last positive clue to Nita Dupont will be gone too, and I need dread neither Lumley, nor Stretton, nor St. Georges himself again. He may separate from me any way, but it will be on terms of my own making then! and I'll go abroad, and get introductions, and be in the world—such as it is—of Letty and her bishops still! Now to get him to appear with me at this ball of Mrs. Hamilton's! Whatever happens, I will be seen with him in my laces and silks, and the diamonds of a dozen Bryanstone generations once more!"

Once more. Could she have foreseen the prophecy those two words contained!

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

## M. TONTIN'S BONNES FORTUNES.

At a Leicester-square eating-house, a shade or two dingier than the one at which Honoria had come across St. Georges, M. Tontin, on the afternoon of March twenty-eight, betook himself to dine: Mrs. Fairfax having dragged poor Richard to spend a couple of days in the country with some excellent women of her acquaintance, who viewed the Frenchman in the light of Antichrist, and would on no account permit his heathenish presence among the little chosen flock of their pious maid-servants.

Nothing delighted M. Tontin more than one of these rare bursts of freedom. Arrayed in one of Richard's coats, a pair of baggy trousers, so largely checked that each leg contained scarcely a bar-and-a-half of pattern, a cherry-coloured tie, a hat fiercely curled at the sides, orange-kid gloves, and white cloth buttoned-boots, Tontin trod the earth with the feeling of a man who knows that, as far as dress is concerned, he has reached the highest point attainable by human capacity. If he had read Mr. Lewis, Tontin would have said that any more elegant project for clothing man's frame than this was simply "unthinkable;" and with his sallow cheek-bones rouged, his bristly, short moustache waxed, and his whole person furiously scented with patchouli, he had walked all the way from Richard's house to Leicester-square under the profound conviction that every young woman he met had, then and there, coveted to possess him.

"Such is the perversity of the sex!" he remarked to the head-waiter, an old Parisian friend, as he looked over the carte. "With all the world open to them they persist in their fancies for a man like me. *Moi qui n'a jamais aimé, et qui n'aimera peut-être de ma vie!*" And then, with a Byronic air, Tontin made eyes at his own hideous image in the oppo-

site looking-glass, and stroked his moustache with the pantomimic gesture of a man who, even at the crowning-point of human vanity, remembers that Pomade Hongroise is not wholly innocuous to orange-coloured kid gloves.

"André," said a voice in French, close to his ear, "comment ça va-t-il? Ici je m'appelle M. Blanc. Personne ne me connaît."

The muscles of Tontin's face twitched into contortions horrible to see; his sallow cheeks paled under their rouge. To great men who have risen, the sudden mention of the name they bore in obscurity can never be wholly unaccompanied by emotion; and, even under the protection of the British flag, M. Tontin knew there were past circumstances that might still lead to ugly catastrophes, should they come to light.

He turned slowly round to his interlocutor, and as he saw his face his own, if possible, became a shade more livid. "Bernadin!"

"M. Blanc," interrupted the other, quickly; "Bernadin died in prison long ago. Do I look like his ghost, camarade, or what, that you stare at me so strangely?"

"I—I—am overcome by the unexpected pleasure!" said Tontin, recovering his politeness as he remarked that his friend was tolerably well-dressed. "It is some years since we met, friend, and time has changed us both from boys into men."

"Or, rather, from men to children again," remarked the other, with a harsh laugh. "Look at my hair, André. When I saw you last—five, six years ago, is it?—it hadn't a white hair in it. Look at it now."

It was white, in patches, as new-fallen snow, and looking more unnaturally blanched than hair ever looks in old age, by reason of the face beneath being that of a man in the prime of life still. Meeting him accidentally in the street, a stranger could scarcely have failed to notice this Frenchman, and to speculate upon the life that had brought him to what he was now. His delicate, high-cut features were thin to emaciation, his cheeks jaundiced and shrivelled, his shoulders drooping, his blue eyes sunken and hollow.

"Ill?—no, no, I have not been ill," he said, in answer to Tontin's inquiries, "only living in a climate—a climate unsuited to my constitution. you understand, and not recovered

from its effects yet. I'm going abroad on the 30th, the day after to-morrow, a better climate this time—Algeria, and no doubt the change will restore me. Do you dine here, *mon petit André*?" he continued. "Shall we eat together, talk over old times, old friends, old mistresses, once more together? Hein?"

M. Tontin was nothing loth; and, as dinner proceeded, confidences became warm and thick between the old friends, —with this difference only, that while the valet poured out falsehoods and truth together, with the unblushing simplicity for which he was unrivalled, a visible constraint withheld M. Blanc's tongue whenever he approached the two or three later years of his own life. He gave vague hints of some dark misfortune that had overtaken him; of some iniquitous household treachery; of some woman who had sold him. But these were hints only; and Tontin, wholly occupied in himself, and speaking familiarly of Richard's house, and Richard's hunters, and Richard's movements, as of his own, never pressed for any further details respecting his friend's story.

When dinner was over, M. Blanc began speculating as to the best manner of passing the evening. He had lost the habit of sleeping, he remarked; and, although he must be up early making preparations for his voyage, had no intention of spending any one of his few nights in London in bed.

"*Sapristi*, no!" cried Tontin, upon whom the effects of some very good Pomar, ordered by M. Blanc, were already discernible; "I'll take you about with me; I'll introduce you to English fast life; I'll show you lovely women by the score." What time was it now? taking one of his master's watches from his pocket—half-past six; that left them three hours at least to go through before they could show themselves to the world. Should they go to his place, smoke their cigar, and drink a "*gloria*" together in memory of old days first? His time, his services—I think he said his house and retinue—were all at the disposition of his friend.

M. Blanc, after a little polite reluctance, consented, and half-an-hour later a hansom deposited the two Frenchmen before the door of Richard Fairfax's house.

"The—the family is away," said Tontin, for the first time alluding to the existence of any man or woman who could be construed into the light of his employer, "and we shall be to ourselves." Then he opened the front door with his latch-key,



and with a somewhat less lordly tread than that of the pavement (for there was a housekeeper whom Tontin dreaded in his soul), ushered his friend up to that little sanctum of Richard's, where Letty had taken her bishops to look at the study after Watteau.

"Here you see our real national idea of 'comfort,' " he remarked, in a piano voice, after turning on a very faint jet of gas. "Seat yourself, my friend, and regard all I possess as your own. *Que diable!* 'tis not every day of the week that friends like you and me meet each other!"

M. Blanc seated himself in the very chair on which Bryanstone had been found with Honoria kneeling by his side; a case of Richard's best cigars, with all the necessary ingredients for the "*gloria*"—two tall glasses, coffee, quantities of lump-sugar and brandy—were then produced by Tontin; and the evening proceeded pleasantly. M. Bernadin, with perfect breeding, abstaining from all coarse questions as to Tontin's exact *status* in this well-appointed English house, and listening with every appearance of interest and credulity to the accounts of *bonnes fortunes*, of all kinds and dates, with which his host entertained him.

"Beauties!" cried the little rascal at last; and when repeated *petits verres* were beginning decidedly to tell upon him,—"*English beauties*—women of the highest position—why, I can show you a book full of them. *Tenez*, look at this!" and he took up a book of photographs from the table at his side: "I have an album for each nation, English, French, Italian. This is my English one. Only honour—honour, remember! Every confidence on such a subject is sacred!" And shaking his head, with an assumption of the most atrocious Lovelace air he opened the book and placed it in his friend's hands.

On the first page of the book was a beautiful vignette of Honoria. In spite of all Letty's protestations, Richard had insisted upon putting it there. He was going to fill the album with all the prettiest faces he could find, he said, and Honoria, whatever her sins, had a right to stand first upon the list. Her face was one that always photographed well; and this vignette was the best that had been ever taken of her. Nearly full face; with the inscrutable eyes cast down; a half-smile on the granite-cut lips; the soft hair low on the forehead, and pushed back from the temple; the photograph was a marvel

of individuality and grace. No one could look at it without exclaiming at its beauty; no one who had once seen Honoria without instantly recognising the truth and fidelity of the likeness.

Reserved as he was, a sound, something between an oath and a sob, burst suddenly from the Frenchman's lips. He started to his feet: he literally staggered in his excitement to the light. Then he held the book up, and gazed, and gazed upon the picture with the insatiate hungry look that only love, or love's stronger brother, hate, can ever imprint upon a human face.

"Fine woman, compagnon, very fine woman!" cried Tontin, who was not quite in a state to be cognisant of the more delicate tokens of emotion in others. "But too much of the tigress in her to be altogether to my taste. Turn over and you'll find a dozen prettier. True English beauties, fair, soft——"

"André," interrupted the other, returning to his side in a moment, and laying his hand with a grasp of steel upon his shoulder, "*Où est elle? cette—cette femme!*" His lips were drawn till his teeth showed in a ghastly smile; a wild excitement shone on all his wasted face.

"She? O, well, well," M. Tontin did not care to be so much pressed for details, "she is hanging about somewhere in London, I suppose. I—the fact is, mon cher, I never had much to say to her myself. Turn over and——"

"Does she live? Yes or no." His grasp tightened ominously.

"Live? of course, of course," cried Tontin, pettishly. "You don't think I fill my album with dead women's pictures—things you can buy for tenpence at the print-sellers. The young person lives, and as you seem to be taken by her face, I may as well tell you the rest at once. She's married to a rich milord—a man with one of the finest properties in England. Do you want to know more?"

"When did she marry?"

"O, about six months ago, I think. I really have too many such dates in my head to be very accurate."

"Where is she now?"

"Hein?"

"Where is she now, I say?"

"Well—really—I cannot say. In Italy, perhaps," for

Tontin, though tightish, was by no means so drunk as not to see the expression of his companion's face. "If you turn on you'll find a soft young person—"

"To hell with your fooleries!" cried out the other with sudden passion; "and answer my question. Where is this woman? You'd better mind what you say."

"I—I? Bernadin, mon bon ami," cried Tontin, jumping up nervously; "what have I to do with the woman or her whereabouts? She married, as I told you, and I've lost sight of her since. If you were to go mad with love for her on the spot I swear that I could tell you no more. What possesses you about her face? Is she the only handsome woman in the world?"

"She's the only woman in the world about whom I concern myself," answered the stranger doggedly. "And about her I concern myself so much that I don't leave this room till I've heard all that you've got to tell me. And truth, mind! Quite a different style of story to any you've been giving me to-night, my little Tontin!"

Then it flashed suddenly on Tontin's mind that matters were becoming far too serious to be pleasant; and rendered sober by the suddenness of the attack, he actually for a minute forgot to lie. The portrait was of an English married lady; of—of a relation of the house. He, Tontin, had scarcely known her to speak to, and could give, at this moment, no information whatever as to her movements. Was his friend satisfied?

His friend regarded him, after he had spoken, steadfastly between the eyes; a kind of process inimical alike to every prejudice of M. Tontin's education, and to his own delicate sense of breeding. "André," observed M. Blanc, when this initiatory process was over, "shall I tell you what my profession is?"

Tontin's lips quivered in spite of himself.

"I am in the employ of Government."

"In—in—?" But all Tontin's valour, all his tragic tones, all the valour inspired by the cognac, seemed oozing out fast from his clammy face; and he could not finish the sentence.

"Yes, perfectly right; in *that* branch of the service!" answered M. Blanc, calmly. "And with the power, but no wish to do you any injury, unless you persist in being obstinate."

Allons ! Why should you keep up the farce any longer with me ? The woman is no more to you than your master's house, or your master's coat and waistcoat, are ! And, whatever happens, *you* won't be hurt by what you tell me."

"Will you swear that ?" cried Tontin, piteously. "Bernadin, I have never harmed you. If I knew a thing or two against you and found you in an honourable position, I wouldn't betray you, *mon ami* !" And, thoroughly overcome, the tears rushed into Monsieur Tontin's sensitive eyes. "You'll swear not to betray me ?" he blubbered. "You'll never let my name appear in any way ?"

"Never," the other answered. Whatever he wanted to know concerned him personally. Whatever should be done would implicate him alone. And then, bit by bit, and deviating, ever and anon, into falsehood, but ever brought sharply back into the path of truth by the keen professional assistance of his friend, Tontin gave every detail that he possessed—including his own first suspicions—concerning Honoria.

"And they suspect her, too ?" cried his companion, when he had finished. "The family—the husband—suspects her of something worse than being a governess before her marriage ?"

"They suspect her, God knows of what !" answered Tontin, with a shrug of his shoulders. "At all events, the husband, as I tell you, has already fought a duel in defence of her reputation, and from what I gather"—this was Tontin's delicate way of putting, 'from what I listen to of my master's conversation'—"from what I gather, only wants proof to turn her away from him altogether."

"Only wants proof—only wants proof !" repeated the other, slowly ; and tasting the words as he uttered them, as an epicure might the name of the *plat* upon which he is to dine, or the lover the exact words in which his mistress has promised to be his. "Wants proof ! So. He shall have it—he shall have it ! André, my friend, when I saw you to-day, some voice said to me, 'the turn of thy life has come, Bernadin. Go to yonder little rascal, and speak to him, and good will come of it.' The voice spoke true. You've done more for me than any man or woman ever did before. You've helped me to my revenge. Revenge, black as death, and sweet, sweeter than anything I know about in life ! Can I reward

you, André ? I'm a poor man ; but if there is anything I could do for you, name it ; and it shall be done."

"What you can do for me is, to forget you ever met me, friend," answered Tontin, promptly. "Days have changed since you and I were together last, and the word that now means all that youth, and love, and pleasure meant then is—character. What will you have ? 'tis the inevitable lot of all of us. At forty a man is either a fool, or a good bourgeois. And I am not a fool. Swear to forget me, and I ask no further act of gratitude at your hands."

"I will do so, *mon petit*. From this hour forth, as long as I live, your face is that of a stranger to me, and your name (or any of the forty aliases you have borne) unknown. I swear it."

And then, this singular act of friendship having been pledged in one more parting glass, the man who called himself M. Blanc prepared to depart.

"Hôtel des Pays-Bas, Brussels," he repeated, as Tontin, with a greatly relieved heart, saw the last of him, late in the evening, at the door—for no further allusion to a night of fast London life had been made by either of them. "I shall not forget. My business now will be to put off my voyage to Algeria till another mail ; or if that can't be done, to forfeit the passage-money with a good grace. Camarade, good-bye."

"And I have found her, I have found her !" he murmured to himself, as with rapid erect step he walked on his road alone. "Great God, I thank thee ! The hour has come. For such a wrong as mine I knew that there must be a reckoning . . . and I was right ! She shall see my face to-morrow."

"And this is photography," thought Tontin, as he carefully shut the book up and returned it to its place. "It's an art that commends itself, doubtless, to the simple vanity of private individuals—but to a public character, never ! But for photography this young woman might have lived respected and died regretted, as I shall. So much for art !"

And then, with a lightened bosom, M. Tontin arrayed himself in (Richard's) full evening attire, and started for "The Oxford."

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

## THE MAN IN THE MASK.

DURING the five or six days that succeeded that of his return from Paris, the Count St. Georges was sensible of being under strict surveillance. It was no new experience to him. At so many different times of his life, and in so many different places, he had been under the paternal care of the police, that it was rather a familiar, home-like sensation to him than otherwise to know that his movements were watched; his comings and goings dogged. All he wondered now was, under what particular suspicion he lay? With what especial object had the evil-looking man who hovered about his lodgings night and day—who tracked him to his café,—who followed him home from his réunions—been set to watch him?

Had he known in *whose* employ that evil-looking man was, the Count St. Georges' mind would not have been quite so light as he fluttered forth daily to his dinners and balls; for thanks to Honoria, he was now in the gayest Brussels set. But his acquaintance with Anthony Stretton, years ago, had only been a passing one; and in this wild desperado of the streets, with his hat slouched over his eyes, his squalid overcoat buttoned half-way over his face, it never occurred to him to suspect the sleek, trim, over-dressed banker's clerk of former days—Anthony Stretton as he used to be before Miss Forrester and the Count St. Georges ruined him.

A note Honoria wrote him on the morning succeeding her visit to his house had, indeed, for the present, put Anthony Stretton altogether out of St. Georges' mind. "You were right, after all," she wrote, carelessly. "I saw Anthony this morning, and found that a very moderate sum of money was all the poor wretch wanted to take himself off with. We need not have been so melodramatic last night! He has gone

away, quite quietly, with five-and-twenty pounds in his pocket, and I should say wont trouble any of us again. He says, and his face says for him, that he is already in the last stage of decline." And then the note went on to command St. Georges' appearance at a fancy ball about to be given by the rich English widow, Mrs. Hamilton; an invitation to which she, Honoria, had procured for him and enclosed.

And the Count St. Georges accepted this invitation; and during the days that intervened between his acceptance and that on which he said to himself he would take the wealthy widow's heart by storm, he walked more resplendent than ever on the boulevards and in the park; and came out in neckties each of which was a marvel of fashion and good taste; and wore early spring violets in his button-hole, and lovely gloves upon his well-formed little hands. And still the man in the down-slouched hat and squalid buttoned-up coat dogged every one of his movements more closely.

Among all the women in Brussels who were looking forward to Mrs. Hamilton's ball, Honoria's was probably the heart most feverish with excitement when the evening of the thirtieth arrived—the thirtieth, the day on which Bernadin was to leave England, as she hoped and believed for ever! Partly because he would not refuse Nelly Bertram's last request of him, partly because he guessed that he would pain Laura Hamilton by his absence, Bryanstone had promised to appear, in plain dress, for an hour at this ball, and Nelly was to remain, as long as he did, in a pretty little Italian peasant's costume that Honoria's taste had chosen for her. As to Mrs. Bryanstone, all the women of her acquaintance felt, as she felt herself, that she would be the empress of the fête, in her brocaded Madame de Pompadour white silk; brocaded with bouquets of pink roses (for she made no concealment, as plainer women do, of what she would wear), with roses in her cloud of soft gold-powdered hair; and a wealth of diamonds upon her perfect neck and arms. I say, she knew as well as her friends did how she must look in such a dress; but it was with far more complex feelings than those of vanity that her head throbbed, her pulse quickened, as the hour came near for her to dress.

True still to the leading, I had almost said the sole, human weakness she possessed—her belief in omens—she had repeated constantly to herself during the past week that this

ball would in some way be the turning-point of her life. The last time she would ever appear in public, honoured, and as Bryanstone's wife; or—but from realizing the brighter augury, even now, with the sea already, as she hoped, bearing her worst enemy away from her, with the certainty of a brilliant success close at hand, her heart shrunk with an unaccountable foreboding.

"Fool that I am to give way to such fears," she said to herself, when her toilette was over and her maid had left her, seemingly in rapt, delighted admiration of her own image before the glass. "I have had these forebodings before—the night . . . the night *she* died—the day when I stood by the window and watched for Letty Fairfax—the night I sat in the cab and waited for Bryanstone's return. And each time the forebodings were wrong, and I won! Why shouldn't I win now? With Bernadin, is not my worst enemy gone? Are not Stretton and St. Georges in my hands? Blind puppets, only waiting for me to pull the string that shall send either of them, or both, to destruction! Doesn't Bryanstone, appearing with me in public, show that at least he has not judged me yet? When he sees all the world at my feet, as they will be to-night, wont he pause at the thought of putting me away? of publishing my shame and his? and letting me go? For I *am* beautiful. I *am* what men love and desire: even he. Why, he turns pale, yet, when I look into his eyes. He must—he must waver when he sees me as I am looking now!"

But still, and even while she strove to reassure herself thus, the unwonted weight would not be lifted from her heart; and finding the companionship of her own image, in all its perfect beauty, so little cheering, she gathered up her skirts, and, summoning her maid to carry a taper before her, started along the many-doored, winding corridor that led to Miss Bertram's room.

As she reached the top of the landing, just opposite Nelly's door, she paused, without knowing why [such a dream of loveliness as she looked! Her roses, her brocaded silk, her diamonds shining in the solitary taper's subdued light], and stooping a little forward over the balustrade, glanced down into the half-obscurity beneath. A man's figure was standing about half-way down the first flight of stairs; and exactly as she leaned over he lifted up his head and looked at her. It was too dark for her to distinguish one of his features. **AN**



she caught was a momentary glance of a pale, emaciated face; of a shrunken form; of hair snow-white as a man of eighty's. A momentary glance, and then the figure passed quickly down out of sight; and Honoria, with death at her heart, and limbs turned suddenly to stone, stood staring after him in the darkness.

No. It was not possible. She was only growing a weak, contemptible fool; ever seeing the thing she dreaded in every chance face that met her in the dark. How could he be here? Bernadin here? Was he not to leave London to-day, and was not this an old, worn man utterly unlike Bernadin, save—save for that turn of the head, that terrible trick of the eyes that for a moment had sickened her? With a supreme effort she nerved herself; thrust the new omen of evil boldly aside; and with a smile upon her lips—had she not learned to smile at will from the time she was fourteen?—passed on into Nelly Bertram's room.

It would be difficult to picture a greater contrast than the two young women presented to each other at this moment. Honoria, magnificent in her silks and jewels, her complexion artfully, delicately white and red, her golden hair in clouds of fleecy curls, the professional smile, that passes current so excellently with the world, upon her lips. Nelly, in her simple peasant dress, her thin cheeks pale and dark, just as Nature made them, her brown hair plainly drawn back from her temples, and a heavy, joyless expression—was she not to leave what she loved upon the morrow?—visible upon all her face.

Mrs. Bryanstone came up and examined the details of her dress with attention. "You look very well, Nelly. The dress is a real one, and it suits you. Only one thing—you won't mind my saying it? Your complexion is a great deal too pale, child, for a fancy ball."

"Too pale for any ball!" said the girl, quickly; and glancing at the two reflections that seemed to mock her so bitterly from the cheval-glass. "But as I am only going to be a spectator for an hour or two, it does not matter over-much."

"Spectator or actor," answered Honoria, "it is as well to make as much of yourself as possible. What should I look in all my silks and diamonds and gold-powder, if I had no rouge upon my cheeks? I'm no more ashamed of it than I am of the mock-roses in my hair. Why should I be? Are they

not both equally false, and equally requisite before the foot-lights—I—I mean—under the gas? Take my advice, Nelly, for once. Don't be old-fashioned, and let me put the slightest shade of pink on your cheeks. I'll get it in a moment, if you like."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Bryanstone." You are very good—I am certain your offer is meant kindly—but I would rather go plain and unbeautified as I am."

"O, as you like!" answered Honoria, carelessly. "*Rouge végétal* no doubt represents some deadly sin to your mind, and you feel conscious of performing a moral duty in being pale. I really forgot what I was about when I proposed it to you."

"*Rouge végétal* represents nothing but *rouge végétal* to me," said Nelly. "And as for morality, I don't go in for it—indeed, I don't believe I rightly know what it is. I have quite another reason for saying I would not have my cheeks rouged."

"May I hear it? You certainly want none at present, child. Your cheeks are rosier than mine—and with a better tinge of red!" added Honoria, in spite of herself.

"May you hear why I would not rouge? Yes, if you wish it. Because—once—Mr. Bryanstone said he hated it. That's my morality."

Mrs. Bryanstone was dead silent for a moment. Then, utterly to Nelly's amazement, she went up and laid her hand softly, almost tenderly, on her shoulder. "Nelly," she said, "if I had ever known such a morality, I had been saved!"

"Honoria?"

"If I had ever known what it was to love any man, I repeat—I might have been saved. There are heaps of religions and tomes of moralities in the world, and I've never thought much of any of 'em; but lately, since I have seen you nursing Bryanstone, I've felt, somehow, there is one good thing that I've missed, and—that might have made me different. Nelly, what is it like to be in love?"

There was, for once, such absence of theatre in her manner, there was such earnestness in her voice, such a strange wistful look upon her face, that, for the first time since she had known her, Nelly's heart softened towards Henry Bryanstone's wife. "You needn't answer! you needn't answer!" Honoria cried, hastily. "If you were to speak you'd talk

duty, and renunciation, and self-sacrifice; and no words of that kind mean anything for you. When I have looked at your patient eyes as you nursed him—when I have looked at you, watching for him with your white face by the window, I've *felt* what love must be like, better than you can tell me! Yes, Nelly, whatever they say of me, you remember this—remember that I had it in me to be as good as the best woman of you all, if life had only given me a chance—which it never did! Are people good or bad by choice, do you think? Was it my own free will that made me Honoria Forrester, not Nelly Bertram? When I was seventeen, your age—do I say seventeen?—when I was a child of twelve!—hadn't it been ruled for me that I should fight my own hard, unequal battle in life? Wasn't the capacity of love taken from me before I knew the meaning of the word?—But what do I talk this rubbish for?" she interrupted herself, with a laugh. "Forget it all, or think of it only as a piece of sentiment I've put on with the rest of my travestiment. Sentiment from me! Come away, come away, Nelly. I have strange fancies to-night! Five minutes ago I thought I saw a ghost's face upon the stairs, and now I am calling up other ghosts—ghosts of things that never were, and never shall be, for me. There!" and she stooped suddenly, and kissed Miss Bertram's cheek. "I have said more to you than I ever did to anyone else before, and, if I could have liked any woman, I think I should have liked you. Come."

They went downstairs, Honoria seeing no ghosts this time; and in another quarter of an hour were amidst the long cortège of carriages that already thronged the street before Mrs. Hamilton's house. A dense crowd was assembled to see the guests alight; and while Bryanstone and Nelly sat silently, busied with their own thoughts, Honoria, her brain on fire with excitement, kept scanning all that sea of faces that surged round them as the carriages passed along. What was it that she expected to see as she looked out thus? Stretton, probably; for the poor wretch watched all her movements, and, more likely than not, would be there to see her in her diamonds and her roses. Whom else could she expect to see? The vision she had passed upon the stairs? The man with the snow-white hair and the trick of face so horribly like to Bernadin's? Bah! Why should he follow her here? and if he did, what mattered it? Was not the real Bernadin

already on the sea, leaving England and his old vengeance behind him, and ignorant even whether she was still in existence?

When they got quite close to the house their carriage had to stop for four or five minutes; and Nelly, who sat facing the horses with Bryanstone, remarked that they must be in good time, as the musicians were only now going in through a side door.

"And a man with them in a mask," she added. "I didn't know masks were to be worn. Look out, Honoria, and tell me if that's what you call a domino. There! to the right. Quite an old man he must be, from the colour of his hair and his walk."

With a sickening suspension of her breath Honoria bent her head from the window, and saw the same figure that she had already seen that night upon the stairs. Whatever else he was, she could swear to that. And again her heart stood still.

A moment later, a gaunt, shabbily-dressed man pressed forward to the carriage window from the crowd, and cautiously leaning forward as she prepared to descend, whispered a word or two in Mrs. Bryanstone's ear. She stood irresolute, with her face rigid, for a moment; then she answered, in a whisper, of course, but a whisper that found its way straight to Anthony Stretton's heart, "Yes, *both*. And to-night. I will not forget you afterwards."

And then she turned back gaily to her companions, and leaning upon her husband's arm, passed on into the house.

The Count St. Georges, powdered, ruffled, frizé, was the first person upon whom her eye rested as she entered the ball-room. He thought that she smiled upon him as she had never smiled before.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

## HONORIA FORRESTER'S HUSBAND.

It was a clear spring night; starlit, still, and so singularly warm for the time of year, that between the dances all the younger and more enterprising of Mrs. Hamilton's guests made their way out through the open windows to the large quaint old Flemish garden which lay around her house.

"Will you come out with me, Nelly?" said Bryanstone, as the third dance concluded. "You have seen all the dresses by this time, and I have done everything in the way of introductions, and bowing, and standing with my hat against my heart, that has been required of me by my hostess. Let us go and have half an hour's talk and fresh air before we go home."

Miss Bertram put her hand upon his arm without a word, and they went out together through the nearest open window to the garden. Imagine a moonlit Watteau, and you will realise the scene that lay before them. A fountain with marble Graces and Cupids surrounding it, black alleys of stiff-cut cypress; laurel hedges shining silver in the light from countless lamps; a close-shorn lawn studded over with groups of figures in silks and velvets; with here and there a solitary domino making his stealthy way on some errand of love or mischief amidst the crowd.

"I cannot help thinking that one of these masks pursues us," remarked Nelly, when they had taken one or two turns about the garden. "It is the same man, I am certain, that I pointed out in the street to Honoria; and I saw him in the ball-room standing just behind her under the shadow of a curtain, and watching her intently as she danced. There! at this very minute he has shot away into the dark alley on our left.

In a minute or two you will see if he has not managed to come up close to our side again."

"Very likely," answered Bryanstone, carelessly. "Mrs. Hamilton told me just now that she had not wished any of her guests to be in masks, but that, nevertheless, a dozen or more dominoes had gained admittance into the ball-room. It is always the case at fancy-balls abroad. Foreigners have a love we can't understand for all the small wit and intrigue and childish banter that the shelter of a mask permits. Does it all amuse you, Nelly? You remember that archery business I seduced you into at Lowick, when you told me you were so miserable and so bored? Does this please you any better?"

"I like very well to see the dresses, Mr. Bryanstone; and when I am home in Norfolk again I shall talk about it all to Uncle Frank of a winter's evening; and looking back, such a scene as this will seem to me just like one of the *féeries* you took me to see at the theatre. Only—" she stopped short and looked up wistfully for a moment at his face.

"Only what, Nelly?"

"Only that this is not the theatre, sir. This is life, and we are all—even I am—playing some part in the piece. How well Honoria looks to-night!" she interrupted herself abruptly. "She is by far the prettiest woman at the ball."

"And you are the best hearted and most generous," said Bryanstone. "Nelly, if you could, you would bring Honoria and me together yet, wouldn't you?"

"God knows I would," she cried, fervently. "Can I have any wish but your happiness, and can you ever know that, living on terms of suspicion and coldness with the woman who is bound to you for life? O, Mr. Bryanstone, Honoria is not all that you think. She said something to me to-night that showed her to me in a very different light to what I ever saw her in before." And then, but shrinkingly, with infinite delicacy and tact, Nelly repeated the scene that had taken place between Honoria and herself.

"Of course," said Bryanstone, with a bitter laugh, as she finished, and speaking more as though he addressed himself than his companion, "the old '*refrain banal*,' as Murger has it. Does any woman of the kind ever fail to sentimentalize, when she can get a listener, about the life she might have led—the

love she might have felt, if—but why do we speak of her?” he interrupted himself. “The last night that we are together we can surely find a better theme than my domestic concerns to discourse upon.”

“None that would interest both of us so closely,” persisted Nelly. “Mr. Bryanstone, I do begin to think you hard and pitiless. I thought from your coming here to-night that you were beginning to soften towards Honoria.”

“Did you, Nelly? Then you made an enormous mistake. I have not changed, by one iota, from my resolves. Let me find out Bernadin, if he lives, and——”

But even as he said the word “Bernadin,” a masked figure glided out from the laurel-hedge beside them, so close that it was scarcely possible he could have missed hearing Bryanstone’s last words, and stood exactly before them. “Sir,” he said, speaking in tolerable English, but with a strong French accent, “I believe I am correct. I have the honour to address Monsieur Bryanstone?”

Bryanstone bowed stiffly; and moved as though he would have led Miss Bertram away. But the mask at once stepped firmly, although without the slightest shade of impertinence in his manner, across their path. “I wish a minute’s conversation with you, sir,” he persisted, speaking in French now; “and, if you please, alone.”

“Not now,” answered Bryanstone; “not to-night. It is impossible.”

The mask approached, and whispered a single word in his ear.

“That is different, monsieur, of course. When I have conducted this lady back to the ball-room I will come out and meet you.”

“No, no, Mr. Bryanstone. I’ll go and wait for you beside the fountain,” cried Nelly, in her independent way. “Why should I take you all the way back to the house?”

She ran away to the fountain’s edge, only a short distance, but out of ear-shot, and stood there quietly, her face turned away from Bryanstone, her head bent thoughtfully downwards over the glistening basin of water. While he lives he will remember the exact outline of the slight girlish figure as she stood, and connect it with this moment of his life! The moment burnt in upon his memory as is that upon the condemned

prisoner's in which the words "reprieve" and "liberty" first fell upon his ear.

"You are an officer of the police, sir, you say," he remarked, turning to the mask, who now that they were alone seemed shy, or unwilling to speak. "What have you to say to me?"

"I am an *employé* of the French police," said the man, speaking still in his own language, and in a singularly compressed sort of voice. "I am more. I am Bernadin."

As he spoke he took the mask from his face, and the lamp-light fell upon it full. It was of an unearthly white; white as the blanched hair upon his head, and with the attenuated features set like those of a man in bodily pain.

"Bernadin," he repeated, in a haggard whisper. "The man you seek, monsieur!"

"I know no one of that name," answered Bryanstone, but his voice was unsteady. "Who is Bernadin? What is his business with me?"

"Monsieur," said the other, calmly, "I like your answer. It shows me that I have to deal with a man of discretion and of the world. Of course you know nothing of Bernadin—of course it must be I, not you, that shall betray his own counsel first! Be it so, monsieur; if you like this description of myself better, I am the miserable wretch who, years ago, became Honoria Forrester's husband."

In spite of all his self-command, an exclamation burst from Bryanstone's lips. "Great God! of—of Nita the dancer?" he exclaimed, with irrepressible eagerness.

The stranger paused and looked at him long and steadily. "Monsieur," said he, at last, "the story I desire to tell you cannot be told in a moment, and a lady waits for Monsieur all this time."

"That matters nothing," answered Bryanstone. "The lady is my friend, and will wait for me. Go on, sir, go on," he exclaimed, impatiently, as the Frenchman still hesitated. "Let us waste no time in unnecessary preludes. You *are* the man I seek, and I am willing to pay you the price you choose for your secret. Name it. And let us go on to business at once."

A strange smile lit up all his companion's haggard face. "Monsieur, that I am the man you seek, I know as well as



you. As for price, if monsieur offered me his year's income—a princely one, doubtless—for my secret, I would not sell it him! Money is good, is excellent. Who should know it better than a poor miserable devil like myself? But there is one thing in the world better still—revenge. For you to pay me would be to rob me of that; you understand. And I would give my life sooner than not taste it to its sweetest, to its uttermost. After waiting so long—after two years of worse than death . . . but stay,” he interrupted himself abruptly, “before I begin, you must answer me one question. Answer it, not as a gentleman answering an agent of the police, but as one man answers another on a question in which each has an equal, and a common, interest. How will you act when I prove to you all that you desire and seek to know?”

“You must speak more explicitly,” answered Bryanstone. “State your question in plain words, and I will give you a plain answer.”

“You promise me?”

“I say it, which is the same?”

“Good. When I shall have proved to you, beyond possibility of doubt, that the lady you have married was once a dancer on the French stage, and afterwards a hired *employée*, a decoy at the Homburg gambling-tables, how will you act?—towards her, I mean, of course.”

“In the hour when these things are proved, she leaves me,” Bryanstone replied, “and while I live I shall not look on her face again. Can you ask me what I shall do?”

“And she will lose *all*?” pursued the Frenchman, in an eager whisper. “Position, wealth, name,—all? Hein?”

“She will leave me,” answered Bryanstone, coldly. “That I swear. What her life may be in any other way I know not. It does not concern me. Mind, I am seeking justice, not revenge.”

“Monsieur,” cried Bernadin, “the sentiment does you honour, doubtless. Perhaps if I were in your place I should feel the same. I believe I should. Before I knew her, I was a just man myself: a man acting from reason, holding his head up in the world, and now . . . well, well! Wait till my story is told, and you will say I’ve had enough to turn a human heart to stone! enough to make me feel that no judgment you can deal out can by possibility be black

enough to satisfy my intense loathing desire to see *her* punished !”

He paused a moment or two, and swept his hand hastily across his face ; then began again in a quiet altered voice, and with mechanical accuracy, like a child saying his lesson by rote—as was indeed the case. During how many never-ending days, during how many sleepless nights, had his miserable lips not repeated the very formula in which he would denounce his betrayer, should the hour ever come in which he should be free and in a position to bring her to judgment ?

“ I was a lad, monsieur, when I first fell in love with the woman you have married : a boy under twenty, looking at her from the parterre of the Théâtre de la Porte St. Martin, on the first night she ever danced there, Nov. 10th, 185—. She could never really dance ; as the Parisians found out when, another season, she was brought out at the Opera, but she was a miracle of beauty, the fresh luxuriant physical beauty that even now, you may, I daresay, imagine her to have possessed in her extreme youth ; and, with a hundred other fools like myself, I fell madly in love with her from the first. That she laughed at me, and at all of us, I need hardly tell you. Such a woman as Nita was not likely to choose a lover from the Quartier Latin. She laughed at me ; took whatever presents I could starve myself to make her, got my best friend killed in a duel before my eyes ; and a year later, when the public had made the great discovery that she could not dance a step, left Paris for ever, without bidding me good-bye. I wept for her for a week, then consoled myself, and thought I had forgotten her. But I had not. As much as it was possible for me to love, I loved that woman, as you will see.

“ I am obliged to make my story brief ; and as my own life has no connexion with the part that concerns you, I need only tell you that during the next four or five years I became involved,” here he lowered his voice and glanced around him cautiously, “ dangerously involved, in one of the political crises of our nation. Monsieur, what does it matter that I tell it ?—involved in a revolutionary measure against the government. You understand me ?”

Bryanstone bowed.

“ Well. One day, when far other things than love or

marriage were in my brain, I received a letter from her, from Nita, dated London, reminding me of my old love, and offering at length to marry me. She had left the stage for ever, she wrote; had realized a modest fortune of her own; and, if I chose, was willing to share it with me. If I was true to her still, I would come at once to the address she gave me in London, and make her my wife. If not, she should accept the hand of an English tradesman who had made her an offer of marriage. And—blind, besotted fool that I was!—I went."

"And—and married her?" broke in Bryanstone with trembling lips.

"I went, monsieur. I arrived in London in the afternoon—how well I remember it—of a dull November day, and an hour afterwards, in the entrance-hall of the house to which she had directed me, Nita met me and fell into my arms! She was handsomer than ever, and at the end of five minutes had me as much in her power as in the first day of my boyish madness for her. I promised to do anything, everything, to the letter, which she bade me. The people with whom she was staying were relations of the man who wanted to marry her, she informed me, and would on no account permit my visits, as a lover, to the house. Through a friend of hers she would make the necessary arrangements for our marriage in a Protestant church, but for greater security, as I was a foreigner, we would be married on the same day by civil contract—before a registrar I believe is the English term. And in the meantime, all I was to do was to be obedient and wait. In all probability I should not be able to see her again until the day when she became my wife.

"I waited patiently, monsieur. I had constant notes from her; but (save once, when, accompanied by her, and acting blindly at her bidding, I procured the licence for our marriage) did not see her till some days later, when at the hour and church appointed I met her and was married. I knew just English enough to repeat some answers after the minister, and when the ceremony was over went off with my bride and her friend—a woman, closely veiled, and who never once addressed me—to the registrar, where we went through some other form or another again, and then was told that I was married."

"And then? go on, sir, go on!" cried Bryanstone. "Then, I presume, you proceeded with your wife abroad?"

"Exactly so," answered the Frenchman, with emphasis. "Then I proceeded with my wife abroad. The woman who had witnessed our marriage went with us to the station, and stood, veiled and silent, on the platform, until the moment of our departure. Then, just as the train was set in motion, she lifted up her veil; smiled and kissed her hand to us both . . .

"It was Nita!"

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

NITA.

"MONSIEUR," pursued the Frenchman, "I feel for your disappointment! You believed, a moment ago, that you were to be rid, legally freed, from the veriest demon that was ever let loose upon the earth to drag men's souls to perdition. And you are not. She is not, she never was, my wife. I turned round, speechless with rage, with bewilderment, to the woman I had married, and the poor wretch, white and trembling, flung herself on her knees, and holding out a letter besought me to read it before I said one word to her. 'Nita had done it all,' she cried. 'The letter was from Nita, and would explain everything!'

"What you want, monsieur, is evidence, not melodrama. Instead of putting before you any of the scenes of that wedding-day of mine, I shall describe to you, in as few words as I can, the machinery by which I had been sold. Wearying of her life as an adventuress abroad, Nita, about a month before this, had come over from Germany to London to see her twin-sister, the only relation she possessed, and a quiet, hard-working girl, living as governess in a school near London. She found her in delicate health; on the eve of exchanging her position for that of companion to an elderly woman of fortune; and between them the plot was laid of which I became the victim. That Honoria Forrester had small share in it, beyond acquiescing in all that her sister's bolder spirit planned, I believe. She had been told by Nita, or so she swore to me, that I had seen her, years before, in Paris, had been in love with her ever since, and had only sought her sister's society on account of the likeness they bore each other. That any woman of sane intellect could give credence to such a tale of idiocy is, and was then, beyond my power of belief; but to you and to me now, Monsieur, this part of the affair

matters little. However instigated, Honoria Forrester did allow herself to become her sister's tool, and married me. They were extraordinarily alike. Why, when I looked at her, veiled and with downcast eyes, as she stood at the altar, I could have sworn that it was Nita! Alike both in height and feature, and with only the difference of hair and complexion that a practised artist like Nita found no difficulty in concealing and making alike for the occasion."

"But the name?" cried Bryanstone. "How could you possibly have been married, twice over, to this woman without detecting under what name she was becoming your wife?"

"Because, in the first place, I was all but ignorant of English and English pronunciation," said Bernadin: "and in the second, I conceived 'Nita' to be a diminutive or *nom de plume*, such as belongs to most professional women, and should have felt no surprise at being told that any other name was her real one. Monsieur," he continued, "if you could have seen the likeness between these two women, you would not have wondered at the acutest man living falling into such a trap as that which was laid for me. On that day, with the hair and complexion altered by Nita's exquisite art, they looked simply identical. Even without any artifice, no one in Paris who saw Honoria afterwards ever for a moment doubted that Nita the dancer—faded, of course, and changed by illness—was the woman I had made my wife.

"For think of me what you will, monsieur, I did not refuse to let the miserable tool of Nita's cunning spend her short remainder of life under my charge. My reasons for doing so were threefold. In the first place, situated as I then was politically, it would have been destruction for me to have had my name dragged forward in any public scandal of any kind. In the second place, I knew from the first, by Nita's letter, that the girl was already far gone in consumption, and could not, by possibility, trouble me long. In the third, I was at once paid over a handsome sum as hush-money by Nita; and money then was the very life and salvation of the great enterprise that I and others had on hand. I kept her, weak fool that I was! Let it be known—this was part of the condition, made before I received my wife's dower—that it was Nita Dupont I had married, and buried her, some nine or ten months later, with my name above her grave in Père-la-Chaise. In fine, monsieur, I became the precise tool that Nita, from the first,

designed me to be ! Hid away her own youth for ever out of sight, helped her to her rehabilitation, under her dead sister's name—and received my reward ! as you shall hear.

“ A month or so before the death of the woman I called my wife, Nita, by leave of her mistress, came over to Paris for a few days to see her sister. To see, I suspect, how I was going on, and what chance there was of her secret being compromised ! She was looking handsomer than ever ! handsomer perhaps in contrast to the other's wasted, palid face, dressed with exquisite taste, but in sober browns and grays, as befitted the demure part she had now given herself to act, and the sight of her irritated me horribly. The real evil she had done me was not, perhaps, a monstrous one. By a clever coup-demain she had put herself in possession of an unstained name, while I had received a large and welcome sum of money for a few months' charge of a dying girl. Honoria herself, poor wretch ! was the one most cruelly wronged in the transaction. But at the time—wearied with other thoughts abroad, and with the querulous complaints of the invalid at home—Nita in her prosperity and with her airs of virtue maddened me. And one day, when something had occurred especially to irritate my temper, I taunted her, half in jest, with my possession of her secret, and reminded her of the difference a word of mine might make in her prospects, any day I chose. A wholly idle threat, monsieur, for my thoughts were occupied with far higher interests than those of any woman's reputation—but it was the cause of my ruin, and of dozens with me.

“ I shall never forget the expression of Nita's face when I had spoken. A light such as I never saw in any other human eyes came into hers. She smiled and came up to my side. ‘ Brother,’ she said, ‘ you spoke ill then—very ill ! But I forget and forgive it. Let this be my bond of peace.’ And she stooped over me and touched my cheek (the first time she had ever done so) with her lips.

“ At that moment I knew that she decided upon my ruin. She carried out her decision well. A week after my wife's death, I and a score of my companions were arrested, condemned, and cast into prison. For more than two years, monsieur, I languished in a dungeon at Vincennes, and at the expiration of that time came out—what you see me ! an old man before I am thirty, and a servant of the Imperial Government. Four out of my friends who were condemned with me

are dead, the rest are lingering out a miserable existence at Cayenne, and I, monsieur, have gained my freedom, such as it is, by the sacrifice of—what? Allons! this is no subject for me to talk about,” he interrupted himself, passionately. “What I have done I have done. Perhaps few men, breathing such an air as I breathed, living without the light of heaven, without the sight of a human face, as I lived, would have decided otherwise. This is my affair, exclusively. Have I told you enough, monsieur, to explain the exact debt of gratitude I owe to my destroyer?”

“You are sure, I suppose, that she was the person who betrayed you?” asked Bryanstone, his voice still calm.

“Not only morally but legally positive of it,” answered Bernadin. “On my trial, the judge remarked that, happily, a domestic treachery had saved the country from the men who were conspiring against her—(against her! Grand Dieu, hear that! Against her!)—and produced a packet of papers which Nita, with her sister's help, must have robbed almost from under my pillow as I slept. From that hour I swore before God to be revenged on her. The hope of my vengeance mainly influenced me in accepting my freedom on such terms as were offered to me. And now, just when I began to despair of seeing her face again, I have seen it, and I know that the hour has come!—The hour has come! and I am satisfied!”

“But I am not,” answered Bryanstone, firmly. “You have told me much that sounds like truth, I confess; but where are the other links in the history? Where is the proof of Nita's Homburg life? Who shall identify the Nita you knew with—with the woman you have seen to-night?”

“The man in whose arms she is, even now, waltzing, monsieur! Jacques—or, as he terms himself, the Count St. Georges.”

Bryanstone exclaimed, involuntarily.

“The ‘Count’ St. Georges who, as a child, performed with Nita at the same thirty-sous theatre in Paris! The Count St. Georges who, as a chevalier d'industrie, stood by her side at Homburg the night when she received the scar that has marked her for life. The scar, monsieur, above her left temple—you know?”

“Yes; I know,” said Bryanstone, almost to himself; and with a start, remembering that night at Brentwood, when he



had stood beside her in her sleep, and realized all the new, all the horrible shame of his own betrayal.

"The Count St. Georges, at her instigation doubtless, found me out about a week ago in Paris," proceeded Bernadin, "and with admirable adroitness contrived to question me concerning a certain Honoria Forrester who had some months before died in the service of an English lady in London, and who, he had reason to believe, was the sister of my late wife. His story, I need scarcely tell you, monsieur, made me instantly suspect that Nita not only still lived, but was still in fear of me. I answered him, however, with the truthfulness that my experience teaches me is, with such people, the surest mystification. Told him, word for word, the story of my marriage; expressed my rage at Nita's having escaped me by death; and informed him that I was on the eve of starting for Algeria, where I should probably remain for the rest of my life.

"Immediately afterwards I found myself on official business in London, and at the end of four or five days, through a singular accident, but not worthy your attention, was upon her track. I arrived in Brussels yesterday; found out, as I had anticipated I should do, that the Count was here; visited him, and bought him—alas! for human nature—at a very low price, to give up all the knowledge he possesses of his friend's antecedents. At whatever hour monsieur may name, St. Georges and myself will have the honour of waiting upon him at his hotel."

But Bryanstone was silent. This was the moment he had so coveted after; this was the very attainment of his desire. Honoria was in his power. He had but to name the hour at which those men should come to his hotel and confront her, and all would be over. And every word that Bernadin had spoken—his account of the marriage, of the resemblance, and the difference between the sisters; even to such small details as the colour of their hair, of the scar upon Nita's temple—every word convinced him that the story was true: and still he was silent. Every generous instinct, every manly impulse of his nature, rose up against the thought of the unequal fight which this woman had now to make, and bade him spare her to the uttermost; shield her even, if need be, with his own right arm, with the shelter of his own name, until the worst should be over. He was English to the core, and, just as had

been the case when Letty threatened to turn Honoria upon the streets, the national spirit cried out now within him not to desert the losing cause, even although it was the cause of the woman who had so basely betrayed himself.

"I will see you, sir," after a pause; "you and your witness, M. St. Georges, at eleven o'clock to-morrow, but alone. The lady you have spoken of is under my protection still, and I could not for an instant submit her to the pain of such an interview."

Bernadin shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "Confront her with us or not, monsieur. That is your affair. A point of delicacy in which, of course, a stranger like myself can have nothing to say. At eleven to-morrow, or to-day rather—it is past midnight—St. Georges and myself will be at your hotel. That is the point alone with which I have to concern myself. Only," he added this in Bryanstone's ear as he turned to leave, "only take my advice thus far, and say no word to her in the interval of having seen me here. She is capable of anything, and your own life would scarce be safe if you told her that you and Bernadin had spoken."

And then, with the quiet, stealthy step of his profession, he glided away, and Bryanstone, like one in a dream, stood gazing at the drooping girlish figure by the fountain—the girlish figure which the last five minutes had brought so strangely near! had brought, at least, within the possibility of his possession!

He was standing so still, lost in the confusion of his own thoughts, when Nelly turned her head, and, seeing him alone, ran back directly to his side. "The man in the mask safely gone, then?" she said, laying her hand upon Bryanstone's arm. "Do you know I felt quite nervous all the time he was talking to you. He had just the stealthy air of a man who would carry a stiletto in his breast, had he not?" And with a child's carelessness of misconception, she pressed Bryanstone's arm, as the mere possibility of his having been in danger crossed her thoughts.

"Nelly," he remarked, after a minute or two, "I wonder whether it is imperatively necessary that you should go away to-morrow?"

"You have told me so, Mr. Bryanstone. You have made me feel quite clearly that you did not wish me to remain."

"Have I? have I, indeed? Nelly, remember that. Some

day I shall like you to remember exactly how I acted towards you when I was bound."

"Mr. Bryanstone?"

"Some day, when——. But let us walk! let us walk, and be like all the rest of the people!" he interrupted himself. "I am not quite right to-night, Nelly. My head is not over clear, and something your friend in the mask told me has made it worse. It's a pretty scene, is it not? these dark overarched alleys, the falling water, the quaint old house? Some day I should like to travel further with you, Nelly; show you Rome and Venice, and all the other places I used to like, years ago. It would almost make me young again to see them with you."

She turned away her head from him, and silently they resumed their walk. But the world seemed suddenly set to a new tune for Miss Bertram. Hope she had none. She knew that she must part from Bryanstone on the morrow. She believed him bound irrevocably to another woman than herself. But she *knew*, for the first time, that if he was free he would be at her feet. And the stars shone whiter, and the air of the soft spring night kissed her lips as it passed; and she knew that merely to walk thus, with her hand coldly touching his arm, and with strangers around them, and no speech from either of their lips, was heaven!—happiness greater, poor little Nelly! than she could ever by possibility taste again while she lived.

A quarter of an hour later they had returned to the fountain's edge, and were standing—almost the only people now in the garden—when suddenly a strange glare of light upon the water made them both turn quickly round. The last dance before supper, the "Galop Invernal," was being played, and the ball-room was crowded with dancers.

"It could only have been a flash from the lamps," said Nelly. "Everything looks as it did five minutes ago; but for a moment I certainly thought there was a flame like fire, did not you?"

As she finished speaking, a broad volume of smoke rose slowly above a low wing of the building immediately to the left of the ball-room; and again all the garden reddened under a wave of lurid light. In another moment a flame, bright and piercing, shot up from the very centre of the out-building upon the clear night sky. It was fire. And

utterly unconscious what enfolded them, the music played on, and the dancers whirled faster and faster, with only a few feet of rapidly-consuming lath and plaster between them and the on-coming destruction.

"It is discovered!" exclaimed Nelly, breathless with excitement. "Thank heaven, it is discovered! Some one is out on the roof already."

She pointed to the leads, close beside where the first flame had burst out, and Bryanstone saw the outline of a man's figure, cautiously preparing to descend upon the side next to the garden. Even in that momentary glance, a singularity in the shambling, awkward gait brought back the stranger of Lowick Place to his mind. And with that remembrance came an irresistible conviction that the fire had been brought about by foul play, not accident. Putting Nelly aside, with an injunction not to move from the water's edge till he returned, he rushed to the first open window of the ball-room, and looked on all sides for Honoria. But she was nowhere to be seen.

"Mrs. Bryanstone has been invisible for the last half-hour," said Laura Hamilton, in answer more to his face than to what he said. But if you really insist upon finding her, go through the closed *portière* at the end of the inner dancing-room, and I think you will succeed. She disappeared there some time ago, I know, with the Count St. Georges."

With a face of stone—a face that Laura attributed to jealousy—Bryanstone made his way rapidly through the astonished crowds of dancers, lifted the curtain pointed out to him, and opened an old-fashioned iron-studded door that it concealed. A volume of mingled smoke and flame drove him back, half stifled, to the ball-room, and in another moment the whole scene was one of the wildest confusion.

There was of course no danger to the hundred or hundred and fifty people in the ball-room, who had only to walk out through half-a-dozen open windows into the garden. But, for the first moment, the whole of the women, and not a few of the men, did their best to make their situation a serious one by forcing themselves into those serried masses which make escape in a crowd next to impossible. Bryanstone alone kept his presence of mind; and when the pent-up smoke had disgorged itself somewhat into the ball-room, forced his way

with admirable coolness through the door he had first opened. A small lobby, seven or eight feet square, conducted him to another door, and, almost too blinded by smoke to be able to discern what he was doing, he groped his way to the handle, and attempted to turn it forcibly, but it was locked. This, then, must be an outer door, he concluded, or a door leading to some room not thrown open to-night. Quickly retracing his steps, he now perceived a flight of winding stairs, ascending from the lobby close beside the ball-room door, and in spite of the volumes of smoke that were pouring thickly down them, succeeded in making his way, three steps at a time, to the top.

A glance around him told Bryanstone that by this staircase Honoria and her companion might long ago have escaped in safety. The stairs opened upon a small dais or gallery, communicating with the ball-room in front, and from whence the scared musicians had already retreated to a balcony, connected by a sort of ladder of wooden steps with a conservatory beneath. Impossible that any one in this part of the building could be in danger with a means of escape like this so immediately at hand, and his worst fears set at rest, Bryanstone resolved to return at once to Nelly and see her into a carriage before prosecuting his search for Honoria any further.

On the side of the gallery farthest from the ball-room was a small lattice, or loophole window, such as, in old-fashioned houses abroad, often admits borrowed light from one part of the house to another. But this Bryanstone at first did not notice; indeed the smoke was by this time too blinding for him to see more than a yard or so before him. A moment only he stood still and listened,—listened to the fierce crackling of burning wood and plaster now only a few feet from where he stood; to the confused din of voices from the fast-clearing ball-room; the hoarse shouts of the firemen, who were already assembling in the street without: when suddenly, as he stood thus, a woman's shriek, agonized, shrill, despairing, smote upon his ear. Instinctively, he turned back in the direction from which the smoke came thickest; and as he did so, a bright jet of flame rushed suddenly through the little casement of which I have spoken. The whole air was now of furnace-heat; and faint, and stifling, all that Bryanstone could do was to press on towards the open air and save him-

self. As he reached the balcony a hand grasped his arm, and looking up, he recognised Bernadin : his mask gone, and the red glare of the fire lighting up all his ghastly face with vivid distinctness.

"Monsieur," he exclaimed, "leave the search to me, and go down while there is time! In another five minutes the leads will be red-hot."

"And she?" cried Bryanstone. "Is she saved? is she with the rest below?"

"Leave the search for her to me!" persisted the other, almost pushing him towards the steps, up which two stout pompiers were already ascending. "If Nita is to be saved, I swear that I will risk my life to save her!"

## CHAPTER XL.

"YES; BOTH."

WITH the pertinacious constancy, oftener seen, perhaps, in crazed men than in wholly sane ones, Anthony Stretton had obeyed Honoria's behest of watching St. Georges to the letter. The bowie-knife and pistol that his life, as a New York loafer, had made familiar companions to him, in his breast, he had dogged the Count's footsteps, day and night, during the whole of the past week: and, on the afternoon before the ball, to his own intense satisfaction, had succeeded in tracking to St. Georges' house the very man for whom Mrs. Bryanstone had warned him to look out.

St. Georges was betraying her, then. The hour of retribution—retribution to be worked by his, Anthony Stretton's hand—had come! Two men had to be watched now, instead of one. Two men, if she willed it so, to be put to silence, instead of one. Fear! what should he fear? Could he be more miserable, more separated from her, than now? If they incurred a double guilt, would he not, as he had told her, stand a chance at least of being united to her by a mutual doom? He waited, stealthily hiding during the hour or more that Bernadin passed at St. Georges' lodgings; then followed him back to his hotel—the same one where Bryanstone lived in the Grande Place—and waited patiently, now hovering about the courtyard gates, now walking up and down the street, but never for a minute letting the hotel out of his sight till night-fall. During all these hours, food never passed his lips once; he had got strangely to do without food, he found, the last day or two. But to keep up his strength he consumed, by small doses, a whole bottle of brandy that he had hidden under his cloak when he started in the morning. The result of this regimen was that, by the time he had followed his intended victims to Mrs. Hamilton's door, Anthony Stretton seemed to

himself to walk on air. His brain was perfectly clear. The moment he spoke to Honoria and heard the word "yes" from her lips, he knew what he meant to do ; rid her of her enemies, one or both, as occasion might arise : and felt a glow of pleasure within him at the thought of the righteous work he was about to perform. With the acuteness of madness, he had instantly recognised Bernadin under his mask ; and when the Frenchman, armed in case of need with an order from the Belgian police, made his way in with the musicians, Anthony Stretton, unquestioned, and indeed with his slouched hat and flowing cloak looking not at all unlike one of the "artists" themselves, went in at his side.

As soon as they entered the house, Bernadin disappeared ; and Stretton, too cunning to follow him then, went quickly on with the band of musicians. A servant ushered them through some back-offices to the inner ball-room ; then, by the small lobby or ante-chamber, of which I have spoken, to the music-gallery, and here, one or two friends of Mrs. Hamilton's servants having been admitted to see the ball, he took up his place hidden behind the rest and watched. Watched the forms of Bernadin and St. Georges as occasionally he caught a glimpse of either of them in the crowded ball-room ; watched *her*, the woman who had been his worldly ruin years ago, yet for whose sake he was about to imperil such miserable wreck of life or reputation as yet was left to him now.

How beautiful she looked to him ! floating round in her silk, and jewels, and roses. How different to all the other women there, with her lustrous eyes, her fair bright hair, her marble bust and arms ! Would it not be shame, he thought, that eyes like those should ever be brought to bear the coarse gaze of a cruel crowd ? that that fair hair should be shorn ? those arms pinioned ! that neck—well, well ! What must be, must. Her enemies were to die. That was certain. And if she should be implicated in the guilt of their death, it would at least (this was the fixed image which ever formed the motive of all his wandering dreams) be with him that she would suffer. At all events, she should have another happy hour or two before the fatal moment came. She should dance, poor child ! and enjoy her beauty and her dress, and her success, untroubled ! Time enough for him to do his work when the ball should be over, and the guests dispersing. Both the men he sought would, for certain, remain as long as she re-



mained. Time to waylay them, together, or separately, in the street—and keep the oath that he had sworn to her!

He watched her dance the first four dances, each with a different partner: then came a quadrille, through which she walked with St. Georges. "For policy, for policy, doubtless!" thought the poor wretch; but his teeth were set hard as he watched them. "She can't help it. To prevent showing she suspects him, she is forced to give him this one dance. God—God—how she looks up at him, though! . . . Well, but didn't she look at me the same way, up to the hour she ruined and forsook me? Why should her soft eyes mean more or otherwise than she meant then? . . ."

But when a waltz struck up, and Honoria began to dance it with St. Georges, clasped close in his arms, her loose curls floating on his shoulder, a horrible doubt began to creep over Anthony Stretton's mind. He would willingly be the tool to rid her of her enemy: but not of a lover of whom she had tired! How should he say St. Georges was not her lover? A jealous doubt ripens quickly in sane men's minds: how much more quickly, then, in this poor brain from whence reason was dispossessed, and which want of food and unnatural excitement had wrought up now to the last point of tension? What business—what business—had she in that man's arms? Waltzing? ay, but no man or woman in the room waltzed like these two! Was she not close clasped to his breast? wasn't her breath upon his cheek? her lips (the lips he had vainly coveted to possess) upturned, parted, and scarlet, within only a few inches of St. Georges'?

Anthony Stretton kept rigidly quiet, knowing, with the craft of insanity, that if he once began to move he might betray himself by his gestures; and only when the music was over, when the dancers were dispersed, fell back and moved a few steps away from the place he had hitherto occupied. He would remain quiescent no longer, he began to think. He had seen enough. He would go down now; make his way out to the garden; and, if need be, act! Was he to delay and watch till she had danced her fill? exchanged the last looks of love, the last pressure of the hand with this paramour whom she had commissioned him to murder?

As he moved mechanically away while he thought thus, Anthony Stretton found himself close to the little loophole window of which I have spoken, and, vacillating yet as to

whether he should leave the gallery or remain, and nervously conscious that his face had safest be hidden from the observation of others, he leaned his arm up against the wall and stooped his head forward into the embrasure.

He stood there motionless for at least eight or ten minutes (to this one of the men in the music-gallery afterwards bore witness), then moved away with a start, and ran quickly down the flight of winding stairs. At the door of the painting room he stopped, and for a moment his hand played irresolutely with something concealed under the breast of his coat. A moment, and then another and darker resolve crossed his brain. Let them both die! "Yes; both"—those had been her own words—and by a more lingering death than this! Die in the very room in which they had mocked *him* with the sight of their love-looks and their tender dalliance!

. . . . He turned the key, removed it stealthily from the lock, and once more ascended to the music-gallery; from thence to the balcony outside, which communicated easily with the roof.

In another ten minutes all that wing of the building was in flames.

## CHAPTER XLI.

## ONE VIRTUE.

"You are out of spirits to-night, Count," Honoria remarked to St. Georges, as their quadrille finished. "Has your appearance not produced that visible effect on Mrs. Hamilton that you expected, or what? I never knew you so silent in your life before."

"Nita," he whispered, "I am silent because I am afraid to speak! You look at me as I never knew you look yet. What am I to think is your meaning?"

"Just what you choose," she answered, half turning her lovely profile towards him, and casting her eyes down, as she always did when she had an expression too deep to trust to them. "I think you are the only man in the world who would ask me such a question; but unless you were conscious of your own falseness, you wouldn't be so prompt in suspecting me of double motives."

"Madame, will you give me this waltz?"

She answered by raising her eyes for a moment with a wonderful look of surprised, pleased acquiescence; then laid her hand—he believed it trembled ever so slightly—upon his arm, and they started.

"This waltz was really some one else's," she said, when at length they stopped. "Some Flemish marquis or duke, whose name I can't read on my card; but I have liked it better with you. Jacques, I wonder whether this is the last dance you and I will ever have together!"

"The last? No. Why should it be the last?" he answered; but the words came falteringly, and she noticed that he had to bite his lip to keep it from quivering.

"I don't know why, but I have strange fancies to-night,—a sort of dim dread that things are not going well with me.

I wish I could talk quietly with you, Jacques, a few moments, and alone."

"It is difficult to find a place to do that," he answered. "The garden is as full as the ball-room, and the reception-rooms are more crowded still."

As he spoke, Mrs. Hamilton, leaning on the arm of one of her guests, stood beside them. She heard St. Georges' last words, and influenced perhaps by some latent feeling against Honoria, perhaps by feminine, instinctive foreboding, possibly by the mere conventional wish of being agreeable in her own house, began to regret the crowded state of her rooms, and to suggest the only sequestered spots that might yet be found. If they went quietly through the closed *portière* at the end of the inner ball-room, they would find a haven of rest in the octagon painting-room. It was lighted, she knew, for she had herself been there not half an hour ago, and it was positively empty and cool.

The octagon room had been an addition built on, with the lobby and music-gallery, by a Russian millionaire who had tenanted the house before Mrs. Hamilton. It was built expressly for a studio, and was lighted only by one skylight in the roof and the small inner casement opening upon the music-gallery. A group in black marble in the centre of the room, a divan of dark silk round the wall, was all the furniture or ornament it contained; and for a minute Honoria stood, overcome by a strange feeling of irresolution, at the threshold.

"What a queer, tomb-like room! Only one window in the roof, and that ghastly group of figures, and the solitary lamp burning like a light before some one dead. I've no fancy for the place, Jacques. Let us go back. The garden will clear as soon as the next dance begins."

"Clear of every one but your husband and Miss Nelly," answered the Count. "I saw them vanish a while since under the trees, not at all with the air of people who would quickly return. Surely, madame, you would not run the risk of being called jealous by following them?"

"Jealous!" she cried with a little bitter laugh, but as she spoke she walked mechanically through the doorway, and St. Georges closed the door behind them. "No, no, no. The time has past for either of us to play at any such nonsense as that."

She went straight on to the opposite side of the room, then

seated herself with a heavy, weary air of dejection, and leant her face down against the cushion of the divan. St. Georges stood still to think how handsome she looked then, with the dark purple silk throwing out the delicate contour of head and brow and the dim lamp bringing out in softened light the waxen whiteness of her perfect arms and neck.

"You grow handsomer every year, Nita. Youth and time stand still for you. You are prettier this moment than you were that night at the Porte St. Martin, when you threw yourself on my neck—what were you but a child then?—and cried with happiness over your own success."

"Jacques, I thought you had forgotten those old days of ours."

"Why?"

"Come here, and I will tell you."

He came close to her, then sank on his knees, and raised his flushed and handsome face full up to hers. "Why should you think that I had forgotten the old days of our youth, Nita?"

"Because you have sold me to-day."

The blood rushed up scarlet into the Count's delicate blue-veined temples. "Sold! I"—but he stammered violently.

"Yes, sold. I have been sold by you to-day," and as he seemed about to rise, she laid one of her hands on his shoulder and held him to her side. "It was badly done of you," she went on. "Badly done, I mean, in a worldly sense! I'd have been more worth to you than Bernadin will ever be!"

"Nita, I swear—"

"He was with you for an hour. I saw him on the stairs at my hotel; and he's here to-night. Please don't deny anything. It's foolish, and it hardens me against you. Jacques, I have not a grain of what they call truth or goodness in me, but I don't think I have been a bad friend to you, have I?"

He faltered, almost inaudibly, that she had not.

"You have never thought of me with what men are pleased to call 'love,' you know, and perhaps that has kept me from being ever false to you. At all events, I have not been false. When you were a little fellow I used to help you out of my salary, such as it was,—and don't you remember?—when you'd the fever once, how I nursed you? Why, I was but a

child—what were we both but children, thirteen or fourteen at most?—but still I managed to keep awake at night—don't you recollect?—and gave you your drink, and only left you by day for my work, and bought you oranges by stealing a franc off Mademoiselle Le Sage's dressing-table—I, who had the best character for honesty in the whole corps? Jacques, I don't bring up any of this to make myself appear an angel. You know me rather too well to accuse me of *that*! All I want to say is, that, in my kind of way, I have liked you."

"As a child, yes," he answered. "I believe, as a child you did."

"But later, not?"

He was silent.

"Later, when you met me at Homburg, not? Not in the same way, certainly. I was a woman, you a man, and—well—my kind of life was not a life in which women ever care much for any one; my hands were full of other affairs. But I was good to you still. Where did the greater part of that fool Stretton's money go but into your pockets? When I met you the other day in London, didn't I give you every farthing I possessed? Haven't I launched you now into the way of maintaining yourself with respectability here?"

"Nita, we have been of use to each other," he answered; but turning his eyes down from hers as he spoke. "You have helped me lately, certainly, because you were——"

"Afraid not to do it?" she interrupted him, taking her hand quickly from his shoulder. "Very well. Have it so. That brings me back to the point I started from. I am afraid of you. I have bribed you handsomely to silence, and I should have continued, for my own sake, to do so now. And you have been a fool to sell me! How much money, pray, do you expect to get out of Bernadin?"

The Count rose, and moved a step or two towards the door. "There are other things in the world besides money," he answered, sullenly. "Whatever I have done has been done because I was obliged to do it. Is it an advantage to me, do you think, to be mixed up in any family embrouillement of you and your husband's?"

"I see. Bernadin, in his official character, has been able to frighten you into betraying me, my poor little Jacques! Into swearing to my identity, probably. That is about as much as they would want from you. When is the crash to

come? When is Monsieur Bernadin to be confronted with me? You may as well say."

But St. Georges only shifted further and further away from her. "I've told you as much as I'm going to tell you, madame. What do I know of Bernadin, or of his arrangements with your husband?"

She got up, and was at his side in a moment, her hand firmly grasping his arm, her face wearing the same look it had worn when she first bade Farnham Lumley not to trifle with her. "You know *all*!" she said, in her low quiet tone. "You know when I am to be sold, and the price you are to be paid for your share in the sale. It is not for that at all that I've come away here with you," she added. "Do you think if I had wanted information I should have sought it from you—you, whose lips never knew, never will know, what the meaning of truth is? I asked you because I wished to see—from simple curiosity—how you would answer; if your eyes and lips would lie to me to the last, as they have always done. And I am satisfied;" here she half laughed. "Now I'll tell you the object of my bringing you away from the ball-room. Your life is not worth five minutes' purchase."

The Count started violently, and his handsome face paled under its powder and rouge.

"To say 'in danger' would be an inadequate expression," she went on, calmly. "Your life hangs on so mere a thread that even I myself scarce know whether it is possible yet to save it. It has been so for this week past, mon pauvre petit Jacques! At any hour of the day or night it has wanted but for me to raise my finger, and all the Count St. Georges' little hopes and sorrows and vanities would have been set at rest!"

In a moment the recollection of the man by whom he had been watched flashed clear upon the Count's mind. The great beads started out upon his forehead.

"This—this is a plot!" he cried. "But you forget that I can make the police protect me from your threats! I believe, from my soul, you are in league with this traitor, Bernadin, after all!"

An odd smile passed over Mrs. Bryanstone's face. "In league with *him*!" she repeated. "O, la belle histoire! O, what children fear makes of all of us—even of you, Count St. Georges! In league with Bernadin? Yes; about as

much as I am afraid of him, or shall ever receive further injury from his hands! You know me pretty well, Jacques; have known me all my life. Now, do you think it likely I should find myself brought to the pass where I now am—on the very eve of losing everything, of being betrayed by all of you together—and strike no blow in my own defence? Is it likely, I say?"

The Count glanced about him uneasily; and Honoria read on his face that he was premeditating sudden retreat.

"If you wish to rush to your doom, you will leave my side, Count," she remarked, with an emphasis impossible to mistake. "Talk no nonsense now about appealing to the police. The time to do that has been any time during the last week that Anthony Stretton has been keeping guard over you, and you have let it slip. The only power that can save you now is mine; and somehow—fool that I am!—I think I shall exercise it. Jacques, I don't know how it is, but I do not want you to die!" And she brought her face close to his; the face within whose Circe influence so few men had ever come and escaped; and half-clasped his neck with one white arm.

No spectator of the scene but must have thought it one of love. What then should the reasonless brain, that was noting her every movement, know of her real meaning? How credit her, Nita, with what no human being living (scarcely herself) would have believed her capable of—an outburst of pitying affection towards the miserable wretch who had already received part of the hush-money for his share in her ruin?

"I thought, an hour ago, I could let you die, Jacques! and I gave the word that was to be your death-warrant—and now—now—well, you know I've never loved any one—love has not been my way of life!" with a laugh. "But I've liked you as a companion; and then we were little together, and—*que diable!* what weakness is this? let me say it out! I won't have anything happen to you. I had rather that you lived and sold me again—as no doubt you will—than that a hair of your poor little head should be touched. There!" And she just touched his cheek with her lips. "Keep close to me all night till I have means to make you safe, and never try to make me your enemy any more, petit! I'm not likely to be weak like this twice in my life; and Bernadin's face, if



you choose to look at it to-morrow, will tell you, in pretty plain words, what men who sell me have to expect at my hands."

As she spoke, a hand was heard feeling at the lock of the door, and St. Georges hurriedly moved away and pretended to be engrossed in the contemplation of the marble group in the centre of the room. But the intruder, whoever he was, seemed suddenly to change his intention of entering; and finding this the Count returned to Honoria's side.

"Can I ever forget this night, Nita?" he whispered softly, and looking as he had never before looked, or attempted to look, into her face. "Can I ever forget your noble generosity? the unheard of magnanimity with which you forgave me this—this miserable baseness into which I was so nearly drawn? Ah, madame, if you could be again the *bonne petite* Nita of other days! If when the worst comes, you and I, in another country——"

She interrupted him by a ringing laugh. "Jacques, my child," she remarked, "shall I tell you the only way in which I regard sentiment of this description? As an article of merchandise which is sold to a stupid public on the stage at so much the kilomètre. I've done it, my friend! stood in the shop and sold it—for what it was worth—in my time. Don't expect me now to be a customer for such brittle wares myself. What I said was true; every letter of it. As an old comrade, I like you, and in spite of your intended villany I'll stand by you still. As to anything else—*va!* I won't pretend to play any variations on that worn-out barrel-organ tune. '*Bonne petite Nita*' of other days! Why, I never was good, never was better than now. You and I in another country! In another country, or in this, we should be sick of each other's faces in twenty-four hours if we lived under the same roof. Come here, friend." And going over and throwing herself on the divan, she motioned with her hand to him to take a place beside her, "and talk of something more amusing than all this. Dame! I wish I had a tumbler of iced champagne here. All my grand scene with you, Count, has made my throat dry."

St. Georges seated himself beside her as she bade him, but making no more attempts at sentiment; and Mrs. Bryanstone at once began to rattle on about the ball, and all she had been *doing to-night*, in her liveliest strain. Ordinarily, she was not

a woman of many words; but now an unwonted feverish exaltation seemed to be upon her. How could she tell at what moment a ringing sound should smite her ear? at what moment there should be a rush of feet—a hush—and then she be called upon, with ignorant horror-struck face, to act out a more difficult part than any she had yet given herself to play? . . . . The vile taste in which some of the Englishwomen present were dressed, the awkwardness of the men in attempting to carry out their characters, were the favourite subjects of her wit. She could have selected none more congenial to the Count St. Georges, who hated England and English people as only a Frenchman who has never got farther into English society than Leicester-square can hate us. And so with a fearful death already close around them, with all the tragedy, all the passion of a quarter of an hour ago forgotten, St. Georges and Honoria, like the true children of Paris that they were, gave themselves up, for the last time, to childish mimicry and bursts of heartwhole laughter, just as, in the days of old, they had done between the intervals of work and starvation in the dirty coulisses of the theatre where they had first toiled for their bread—such as it was—together.

For the last time!

"The heat is stifling here, Jacques," cried Honoria, abruptly. She was strutting up and down before him, her fan outspread, her shoulders put up to her ears, rehearsing the minauderies of an elderly young English lady, giving herself the airs and graces of a shepherdess of sixteen. "I can positively hardly draw my breath. The effect, no doubt, of all the heavy Britons in the ball-room, which no continental atmosphere is buoyant enough to bear away. Let us come out to the garden, and get a little fresh air before we go to supper. I really . . ."

But as she spoke a strange smothered sound made both of them start and listen. An outcry, as it seemed, of many voices: then a sudden hush of the music in the orchestra, and the confused, rushing noise of retreating feet.

Mrs. Bryanstone moved a step or two forward, and then leant heavily against the wall. "Something must have happened," she stammered. "Give me your arm, and let us go and see what it is. I—I—have been here with you, remember. I know nothing of what has been going on."

She laid her hand on his arm—and, at another time, St. Georges must have noted how guiltily, how fearfully it trembled. But a new thought, a thought unconnected with her, with Bernadin, with aught save his own personal safety, was bursting upon him: and he rushed to the door and shook its handle violently. It was locked!

"And I am lost!" he exclaimed, passionately. "Lost, penned in here to die, helplessly, like a dog! Great God, is there no escape? Don't stare at me like that—Nita! Leave go my arm, and let me see. It may be possible yet for me to escape by some other way!"

"Escape?" she murmured, passively, and more to herself than to him. "Escape? Why should I want to escape? What have I done? I have been here. I know nothing of all this that has happened."

"Then you will know soon!" cried St. Georges, bitterly. "The place is on fire, and we are locked into this place to die! So much for all your cleverness and intrigue, madame! Locked in here, by one of your own tools, doubtless, to die the worst of all deaths. Grand Dieu! It is upon us already!" And throwing his arms up wildly, he pointed out to Honoria's horror-struck sight a dense volume of smoke already issuing downward through the ceiling about the centre of the room.

At the sight—at the sudden conviction of *what* danger it was that threatened her—all Mrs. Bryanstone's physical courage returned to her. To confront the livid face of a dying man; to see Stretton's reasonless face already betraying her; to hear the whispers of the crowd; to stand, alone, with every eye coldly, shudderingly turned upon her. This was the vision from which she had shrunk appalled, when the first outcry of voices reached her ear. A fire; a mere common animal terror; a narrow escape! . . . Bah! Had she not gone through it all before? Was she not in the theatre in Vienna when it was burnt—the only one of all the shrieking maddened *corps de ballet*—had not she, a girl of eighteen, kept quietly in her place (when others rushed into the flames), and been saved?

"Don't look so white, *mon petit Jacques*, and if you think it will do you good, take out your rosary—I know you wear one—and pray to it! *Courage, mon petit!* We can die but

once, and I don't feel, somehow, that Henry Bryanstone is to be set free to-night."

But when she had taken a closer view of the prison-house that shut them in, with its solitary window high away out of reach, when St. Georges with frenzied strength, had striven once more to burst open the door, and failed, Honoria's plucky spirit did acknowledge to itself that, unless a miracle intervened to save them, they were lost! The air was by this time hot to suffocation; the whole upper part of the room wreathed in dense volumes of smoke, through which, in more than one place, small jets of flame were issuing. Another ten minutes without relief, and, even with the fire still kept in abeyance, no human lungs would be able to breathe in such an atmosphere as this.

"Not much left to us but shouting, Jacques," she cried, looking with a smile at St. Georges' ashen, fear-struck face. "But we may as well make one trial of that. It isn't likely—but some one, Bryanstone himself, may be looking for me, and would recognise my voice."

And then she gave the one long cry, that Bryanstone, indeed, heard: the last sound he ever heard from her lips.

"No good, Jacques, no good," she said, quietly, when another minute had passed—a minute to all the men and women without those four walls—an age, a cycle of agony to them. "Jacques, *pauvre petit*, I am sorry for you. You *are* so afraid."

Afraid! he was more than that. He was standing, had stood for the last two or three minutes, motionless, convulsed; as animals stand always in the presence of fire. At the quiet sound of her voice he started, and turned upon her fiercely.

"But for you I should have lived!" he exclaimed. "You are true to your character to the last. Your death will involve a man's destruction, as every act of your living life has done!" And he seized her hand; then threw it from him with almost brutal violence, and looked with a horrible expression of mingled hate and cruelty into her face.

"Jacques, have you a mind to kill me?" she said, but with perfect gentleness.

"A great mind," he answered. "I feel nearer doing it than I've ever gone to anything I've not done in my life."

"And I, *mon ami*, I wish—fool that I am—to see you saved! Another few minutes, Jacques, and all will be over. Don't die quietly, as I am forced to do. There was a day, I think, when Jacques, the acrobat, could have scaled a window as high as that. Are you sure it's beyond you now?"

The window was twenty feet, at least, from the ground, and opened by means of a cord and pulley attached to the opposite wall. As Honoria spoke, St. Georges' blinded eyes fell, for the first time, upon this cord, and in a moment the wild thought crossed his brain of making it aid in his escape. In the hands of any ordinary man so slight a stay must have availed nothing; but the training of St. Georges' early profession—the profession of which, amidst all his deeds, he had been most ashamed—stood him in good stead now. With the lightness of a wild cat, and almost before Honoria could track his movements, he had raised himself ten or twelve feet from the ground. Then he paused—during one breathless, awful moment—and knew that his weight was too great—that the cord was slackening in his grasp!

"Make a spring, or you are lost! Make a spring—let go the rope!" cried Honoria, with marvellous presence of mind. "Ah," with a sort of sob this came, "*Dieu soit béni—tu es sauvé!*"

It was the first thing approaching to prayer or praise that had passed those pagan lips for years. And, after all, what was it but a thanksgiving for a *ci-devant* acrobat, a French scoundrel, whose loss to the world would be a gain? But let me record, not moralize. Just at the moment when the straining rope was breaking in his hands, St. Georges gave a sudden leap, as she bade him; a leap to which the certainty of death, should he fall, lent almost supernatural energy. His outstretched hand grasped hold of the stout iron fastening of the window; and in another second (in less; the whole escape could scarcely be recorded by seconds) he was safe! Safe, with the window opened, and the fresh air playing deliciously in his poison-charged lungs. Safe, with an easy descent of twenty or five-and-twenty feet to the ground beneath. Life—dear life—before him again, in short—

And Honoria?

He looked back at her, and she smiled and raised her hands to him. "*Tu es sauvé, Jacques! Tu peux te sauver maintenant, n'est-ce pas?*"

"Yes," he answered, he could get away easily. He thought nothing of a descent like this. And besides, there seemed to be a tree of some kind nailed against the wall of the house.

"That's right. I felt you couldn't be going to die. Jacques, this air is horrible. My chest is on fire with pain—Jacques, Jacques, save me! Ah, heaven, I want to live! Can you try nothing to save me? Tear away the curtain, and let it down to me! Try—at least make an effort for me! Jacques, Jacques! I forgive you your wrong to me to-night."

But with the fresh night air the Count St. Georges' brain had cooled, and, as in a sudden flash of light, he saw his position clearly. He had sold this woman; had promised Bernadin at a stipulated price to give his evidence, bear his part in her ruin. And if she lived, she must know it—must know it in a few hours' time: and then, what? She had been sentimental to-night, certainly; had gone in for one solitary virtue, and forgiven and saved him. But what man had ever wronged her and not met with retribution in the end? Why should he be the exception? And now he had her in his power, and if she perished, then and there, all would be over, and his life—his life, that he so loved and coveted, safe! And besides, it was *not* possible to save her. Of course it was not. How could he lift a weight like hers, even supposing that he had means, which he had not, of reaching her?—And still the air within the room grew murkier; the fierce, the horrible cracking of consuming timber more close at hand; the white face and arms upheld to him for aid more indistinct.

"Jacques, I can't breathe. I can't stand this! I can't see where you are! I am stifling! But if you see Bernadin, or any of them, say—I died game—and I'm not afraid—"

And then even her blinded sight descried the shadow of his figure move down from the open window; and she knew that only the sky beyond, with its stars and its blue, was looking on her. St. Georges had gone; had left her here to die alone.

In this supreme moment did all the spectres of her life return and haunt her? The woman whose bread she had eaten, lying helpless and neglected in her hands; Bernadin, given by her to a living death; Stretton, ruined, body and soul;

Bryanstone, betrayed ! Who shall say ? We are accustomed to speak of bodily death as of an agony ; and those who watch it narrowly tell us that nature is more merciful than we suppose ; that the process of dying is not, for the most part, one even of pain. So, perhaps, of the guilty soul *in extremis*. We picture the load of accumulated memories weighing with torture inexpressible in such a moment as this : and possibly the common mother is kind still : the brain paralysed by simple, animal terror of death is no longer in a condition either for human memory or for human remorse !

Till one returns from the dead, who shall tell us ? Who shall dare describe a detail of the great mystery ?

## CHAPTER XLII.

## A PASSION STRONGER THAN DEATH.

ACROSS the park; across the Rue de la Loi; away, with feverish haste, along the Boulevard de l'Observatoire towards the railway terminus du Nord:—then the Count St. Georges, for the first time, stopped, and took courage to look around him.

Far and near above the city quivered one broad wave of unnatural, blood-like red. The gigantic figure of the Archangel Michael glowed out, with weird significance, upon the distant Hôtel de Ville: while, closer at hand, the fretted tower of St. Gudule shone forth, fair and rosy—like a symbol of hope, even amidst the terrors of death—against the background of dark sky.

But the Count St. Georges saw neither the Avenging Angel, nor the lurid wave of blood, nor the delicate phantom church pointing so horribly straight to heaven! The Count St. Georges saw only a white face looking to him for help; saw only a pair of uplifted hands; heard only a choking voice calling upon him, in vain, for rescue!

Honoria, had she left an obnoxious life so to perish, would have walked away with unfaltering step, and head erect, and heart unsoftening. St. Georges' weaker nature led him to repent, look back, vacillate, even before the deed for which he repented had come to its consummation.

Dead? She? With the golden hair that had brushed his neck, the lips that had kissed him, warm and trembling, not an hour before? And he *might* have saved her. And she had been the nearest thing to a friend his shipwrecked life had known! As a child, had nursed him, fed him, oftentimes from her own wretched pittance: as a woman, had been true, in her way, to the companion of her youth; had given him money; forgiven him even his last treachery in betraying



her. And in return he had done—what? Left her to die.

Not so much compunction as fear overcame him at the thought. Superstition, moral sense, conscience; call it by what name you will; something in this hour did call out within St. Georges' breast, and told him that for a deed like this no man can go unpunished. The white face looking to him in vain; the choked voice calling upon him for help; . . . . God, if these were to haunt him while he lived! if there was truth, after all, in the churchyard terrors he had laughed at so often! If Nita's pitiless ghost was ever to stand before his pillow, and follow him as he walked!

Mechanically, with swift but purposeless steps, like one who walks in a dream, he turned back and made his way again towards Mrs. Hamilton's house. As he came nearer and nearer to the fire, it seemed to him that the flames, in the left-hand wing of the building, were gradually lowering under the volumes of water that were now being poured upon them from all sides by the fire-engines. Yes, there was no question of it. The fire on that side, at least, was giving way. He stood still to watch; and in another ten minutes saw that only smoke, and fragments of lighter burning material, issued from the spot where, half-an-hour before, the flames had been at their fiercest. The entire low wing from which he had escaped stood whole; blackened, smoking, smouldering: but whole.

Where was she?

He approached nearer; he crept over the same garden wall by which he had already made his escape: then came close up to the house, which was now utterly deserted, the crowd being collected in the outer street, and on the side where the fire had not yet been brought under. Was it possible, he asked himself, was it possible that she lived still? He looked up to the cupola-like roof of the room where he had left her, and dense leaden volumes of smoke issuing from more than one opening through the roof gave him an answer. Why, he had been away more than an hour: and when he left she was in her agony already! The piteous voice must have been hushed long ago! The white face, in its awful beauty, the shining silk, the roses, the diamonds be—what?

He shuddered; he turned away; he hid his face in his hands to try and shut out that ghastly picture from his soul.

But in vain. It was there still. And the blackened lips called out to him, even in death : and the beseeching, agonized eyes met his : and the hands that were marble no longer snatched at the wealth of diamonds, from the throat and arms, *that an hour ago were beautiful*, and held them out, as though to say, "This would have been the price, if you had saved me. And you did not!"

The diamonds. Ay ; she wore diamonds to-night that might have made him, St. Georges, rich for life : and he had left her there to perish. Fool, as well as cruel ! If he had saved her, risked his life to save her, and had succeeded, would not all she had to give have been his ? Yes. He knew the nature of the woman enough for that. And now all was gone : and he was a penniless adventurer on the face of the earth again, with a dressing-box of trinkets (bought out of her money) for his capital ! And a mine of wealth, a fortune, was, or had been, in his grasp ! . . . Had been ? nay was ; here—within only a few feet of blackened ruin from him—and in his pitiful cowardice he had let it go.

Had let it go—had let it go ! But was it, indeed, gone ? Slowly, indistinctly, inch by inch, as it were, St. Georges allowed a new, a ghastly temptation to take possession of his thoughts. He recoiled from it at first with whatever of humanity there was in him. See her face again as it was now ? rob her—touch her with his hand ? Better go into the first chemist's shop he came to and take poison, and end his own miserable life at once, than do such sacrilege as this ! Yes, if one had courage to die, that might be very well. But he had not. He loathed, he trembled at the thought of death. And if a man lives, he must eat. And what is all life but a robbery ? does one man ever get on without another man suffering for it ? Nita would not suffer—there could be no further loss of any kind to her. To whom, then ? Her husband. What mattered it to him whether the husband were made poorer by the loss of a thousand pounds' worth of diamonds or not ? He was a rich man : and the creed of St. Georges' life had been that rich men were purposed by nature and society alike to be the meat and drink of poor hard-working fellows like himself. Then, as to the horror, as to the sacrilege of this thing he contemplated ? Bah ! was he grown so overnice, that the thought of a dead face, of touching a dead wrist or throat, had power to scare him ?

Why, the whole affair would be over in five minutes ! before he had time to think of what he did. Then, back to his lodgings ; pack up, and prepare to start by the first train in the morning for the other side of the world. In the confusion and horror of the fire, and of Mrs. Bryanstone's death, no thought would be taken, at first, of the disappearance of her diamonds. By the time any search respecting them should be made, they would long ago have passed out of his hands ; and he, a Count indeed, would be on his passage, safe, to any port in the United States for which he might chance to find a vessel bound.

He crept up softly to the wall by which he had escaped, and felt with his hands until he came to the stem of the espalier-tree, which had already served him as a ladder. Then he stood still and listened. The air was resonant with the outcry of a thousand human tongues ; but to St. Georges it was silent ! Silent with such a silence as must have appalled the first murderer's heart, when his brother lay dead before him in the yet unpeopled world. Silent by the absence of the voice that an hour ago before called upon his name ! Fool, did he expect otherwise ? Could she have lived five minutes, at most, after he left her ? Was he going to lose all by delaying, and trembling and listening, like a child frightened with some old woman's ghost-story, now ? Unless he wanted to walk straight to his ruin, to be discovered loitering here, perhaps, and suspected of some share in the fire, let him do—what he had in hand—like a man—and do it quickly.

Rousing himself with a supreme effort to all the practical details of the task that lay before him, St. Georges remembered that a rope or support of some kind would be necessary for his descent into the interior of the room ; and after a moment's consideration decided to make his way boldly round the house in search of what he required. When he found himself among the crowd, men's eyes reminded him—for the first time—how he was dressed ! Powdered, frizé, with lace ruffles, buckled shoes, and head uncovered. God, was it his travestiment only, he wondered ; or some mute witness to his crime upon his face that made them all turn and look at him so as he passed ?

He tried to speak to the first fireman he met, but the words died in his throat ; and the man, with a shrug, turned

away to his work again. Then he plucked up more courage, and addressing a man-servant who, with blackened hands and face, was working, as all men alike, firemen, footmen, gentlemen, worked at the buckets.

"A rope! yes. There were ropes in abundance to be had, lying in a heap beside the nearest fire-engine. Did monsieur want assistance? Had monsieur heard anything," in a lower tone this, "of the English lady and the French gentleman who were missing?"

No; he had heard nothing. No, he did not want assistance. The rope was but to tie together some property of the house that was lying scattered, and liable to be injured, upon the lawn. And then St. Georges made his way to the nearest engine, as he had been told, selected a strong rope from the heap that was lying there, and pushed his road back, resolutely, through the crowd. "The English lady and the French gentleman." There was more need for haste; there was more risk to be run than he had thought! He and Mrs. Bryanstone were identified in a common fate. On the first discovery of her alone, must not suspicion of the darkest kind rest on him at once?

The thought, the danger, nerved him. Once at the foot of the wall, and he neither paused nor listened now. In another minute his light step had climbed up to the ledge of the window, where, with cool unfaltering hands, he fastened the rope firmly to the iron staple, and prepared himself to descend.

Until a few minutes before, the night, as I have said, was dark. But now a pale half-moon had risen high above the city, and shone forth, with strange unearthly whiteness, upon the crimson-painted sky. As St. Georges paused for a minute, to accustom his lungs to the heated air into which he was about to enter, the moonlight streamed full down into the smouldering room; streamed into it not by the window alone, but by several openings that had been burnt through, but were now extinguished, in the roof. The smoke had by this time cleared sufficiently for every object the room contained to be discernible; and bending closer—the cold dew standing thick upon his livid face—St. Georges saw her.

*Her!* The woman who had kissed his face an hour ago. Now a dark and inert mass; a thing from which bright points of radiance shone in the moonlight; but neither good

nor bad, plain nor beautiful, any more. Dead! In thus much, like to every virtuous man or woman who died on the earth to-night. And, quite certainly, beyond our judgment or our condemnation for evermore.

When the ruins of the house were excavated next morning, the bodies of two persons, a man and a woman, were found in the interior of the painting-room. The woman, Nita Bryanstone, bore marks of having perished, quickly, by suffocation; and had been long dead. The man, the Count St. Georges, had evidently met his death, a lingering one, through injuries caused by the falling in of the roof—not by fire.

It was remembered then that, long after the flames had been got under in that part of the building, the whole roof of the painting-room had suddenly given way; probably through the fall of some yet-smouldering rafter. And connecting this with the fact of the Count's being remembered searching for a rope, the general report was that St. Georges had nobly returned to succour his unhappy friend, and had perished in the attempt! Only the police, and those intimately bound up in the tragedy, knew that her diamonds were already carefully hid away in his breast; his steps already turned to leave her, when the moment came that involved them in a common destruction.

How the fire broke out was also a subject never thoroughly made clear to the minds of the Brussels public. That it was the work of an incendiary was only too clear; the mere fact of the flames bursting out in several isolated parts of the roof at once proving, beyond doubt, that a deliberate hand originated them. And many were the stories set afloat by servants and musicians as to the mysterious man in the cloak who was seen to steal away from the gallery, then return to it and pass out upon the balcony, shortly before the first discovery of the fire.

But where that reasonless brain itself found rest, upon the pavement of what foreign city Anthony Stretton breathed his last, was never known!

## CONCLUSION.

"BUT still, I can't think why they have ordered you to the south, Henry. It's all very well for you to talk about wanting to lead a lazy life, and to get away from England and English people; I know, just as if you had told me, that the physicians have ordered you to spend the winter abroad."

It was a silent autumn twilight, a year and a half later; and Nelly and Bryanstone, bride and bridegroom of a week, were walking together once more upon the Norfolk moors.

Bryanstone looked down long and seriously at the tender face upheld to his. "Nelly," he answered at last, "why, like all other children, will you insist upon having so many answers? I am getting as strong as ever I was in my life—have I not run miles and miles for Uncle Frank, after a reptile of some kind, this afternoon? and just because I have a fancy for joining De Bassompierre, and spending a quiet winter at Cannes, you persist in thinking that the whole of the faculty have given me over to die! When you see De Bassompierre you will get fresh ideas as to the tenacity of invalids, Mrs. Bryanstone. Why, five years ago, every physician in Paris and London said he must go in twelve months, told him to an inch how much, or rather how little, of lung he had left, and now he writes me word he is better than ever, and talks, in the spring, of going to St. Petersburg."

"I don't want to class you among invalids at all, Henry. I want to think that you have perfectly got over the effects of your accident, and that you will be strong as you once were!"

Bryanstone turned away from the pleading face, and made no answer.

"You'll like Italy, Nelly," he remarked, after a minute or two. "They tell me we can leave Cannes early in March. April we will spend in Rome. We shall see Laura Hamilton

there. You will like her, I think, for my sake, Nelly, and for all the kindness she used to show me once."

"I like her already, Henry. The letter I got from her on my wedding-morning made me like her at once and for ever."

"The letter you would not show me, Nell."

"The letter I would not show you, sir! Henry," after a silence, only broken once or twice by Bryanstone's short hollow cough, "where is Farnham Lumley?"

"Farnham Lumley? In Scotland. Letty wrote me word that she had met him at some swell place in the Highlands, and he seemed so universally popular (his wife is really dead now) that she felt herself bound to be civil to him. 'And it isn't as if he had really killed you or anything, Henry dear!' she wrote. Poor Letty! As if she ever need apologize for being civil to any rich man that all the rest of the world was running after. Even the man who had the misfortune—for me—of putting a bullet through my side." And he coughed again.

"In a moment Nelly's arms were about his neck. "O, my love, how unjust everything is!" she cried, with a choked voice. "Farnham Lumley well and sought after—and you—"

"I, with Nelly for my nurse; with Nelly to make me forget all the dark cloud, all the shame and bitterness that Farnham Lumley wrought for me! I would not change places with him, child, believe me." And Bryanstone folded his wife to his breast, and kissed her.

"We must go in, Nelly," he said, presently. "Uncle Frank will be waiting for us; and directly the sun goes down I begin to feel the night air heavy on my chest."

She looked up at his pale face, and blinding tears rushed into her eyes while she looked.

As in every human hope, the elements of death were in Nelly's joy from the first!

THE END.

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